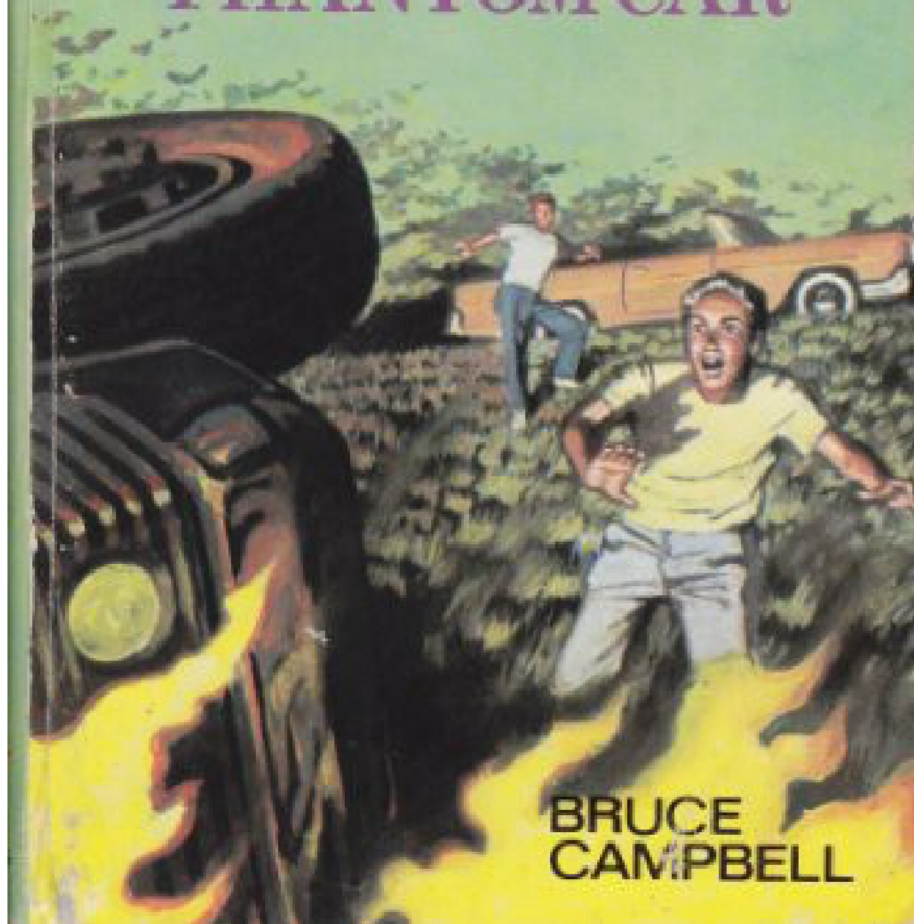


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KEN HOLT
IN THE
**CLUE OF THE
PHANTOM CAR**



**BRUCE
CAMPBELL**

THE CLUE OF THE PHANTOM CAR
A KEN HOLT Mystery
By Bruce Campbell

The KEN HOLT Mystery Stories

- 1 The Secret of Skeleton Island
- 2 The Riddle of the Stone Elephant
- 3 The Black Thumb Mystery
- 4 The Clue of the Marked Claw
- 5 The Clue of the Coiled Cobra
- 6 The Secret of Hangman's Inn
- 7 The Mystery of the Iron Box
- 8 The Clue of the Phantom Car
- 9 The Mystery of the Galloping Horse
- 10 The Mystery of the Green Flame
- 11 The Mystery of the Grinning Tiger
- 12 The Mystery of the Vanishing Magician
- 13 The Mystery of the Shattered Glass
- 14 The Mystery of the Invisible Enemy
- 15 The Mystery of Gallows Cliff
- 16 The Clue of the Silver Scorpion
- 17 The Mystery of the Plumed Serpent
- 18 The Mystery of the Sultan's Scimitar

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER

I THE VANISHING CAR

II UNCONVINCING STORY

III SABOTAGE?

IV NO GLIMMER OF LIGHT

V HEADLIGHTS IN THE AM

VI EXPLODED THEORY .

VII GRANGER ISSUES A WARNING

VIII DUTTON DOESN'T REACT

IX KEN SEES THE LIGHT

X THE PHANTOM CAR

XI CLEAN BILL OF HEALTH

XII FOLLOWED?

XIII MIDNIGHT RECONNAISSANCE

XIV LESSON IN LOGIC XV SPREADING A NET

XVI A SURPRISING CATCH

XVII INVITATION BY FORCE

XVIII GAS!.....

XIX UNDERGROUND .

XX CAUTION! FIREWORKS!

XXI FINAL EXPLOSION

CHAPTER I

THE VANISHING CAR

The surface of the lake shimmered blindingly in the level rays of the setting June sun. The small fleet of rowboats lay in a motionless row, side by side, and the lines that held them to the new dock hung limp in the still air. It had been a hot day. It was still hot.

But under the trees at the water's edge several hundred people had gathered to listen to the mayor of Brentwood dedicate the new lakeside children's playground. Most of them were sitting comfortably on the grass. At the edge of the crowd three figures were standing.

Ken Holt, the central figure, was busy taking notes. He kept his dark head fixed on the speaker while his pencil traced loops, swirls, and hooks on the sheaf of copy paper in his hand. Ken was covering the dedication for the Brentwood *Advance*, the weekly newspaper owned by his closest friends, the Allens.

An Allen towered on either side of him, dwarfing Ken's slim, wiry figure. Pop Allen, the owner of the *Advance*, stood three inches over six feet. His graying thatch of red hair topped Ken by almost half a foot. Pop's elder son, Bert, leaned against a tree on Ken's left. But even Bert's relaxed position couldn't hide the fact that he was fully as big a man as his father. Bert's hair was a bright red-the trade-mark of the Allen clan.

In the meantime, up near the speaker's platform, another redheaded giant was focusing his camera once more on His Honor, the mayor. A flash bulb flared briefly. Sandy Allen, Pop's younger son, was the official *Advance* photographer.

"Sandy's bulb-happy," Bert murmured. "He's already got enough pictures of the mayor to last us through the next three election campaigns."

Ken opened his mouth to rise to Sandy's defense, but grinned instead and said, "Hi, Chief."

A uniformed man had sauntered up to stand beside them. His gold braid and badge proclaimed him the chief of Brentwood's police. As he reached the shade of the tree Chief Kane took off his heavy cap and ran a handkerchief around its sweatband.

"Whew!" he murmured.

Pop Allen took his pipe out of his mouth. "Hi, Andy."

"Hello, Chief," Bert said.

Chief Kane grinned. "As usual I'm walking my feet off. And as

usual the gentlemen of the press are taking it easy.”

Ken corrected him. “Two of the gentlemen of the press are,” he said. “One of us”—he gestured with his pencil—“is working.”

“The mark of the true executive,” Pop Allen said firmly, “is the ability to get others to do his work for him.”

Bert smiled. “And Pop is undoubtedly the world’s greatest executive.”

Chief Kane raised his eyebrows in mock surprise. “Really? The way I’ve always heard it was that Mom Allen was the executive at your house.”

Ken Holt and both the Allens laughed. It was a standing joke that Mom Allen, a scant five feet tall, ruled her household like an absolute monarch.

Just in front of the mayor a flash bulb popped again. This time the flare was more visible. Already the sun was half obscured by the wooded rise beyond the lake.

A spattering of applause ran through the crowd. The mayor’s speech was over.

Chief Kane clapped his cap back on his head.

“Well,” he said mournfully, “I’d better get along and see if I can prevent the complete destruction of the refreshment stand. All the kids in this crowd have been smelling hot dogs and soda pop for an hour. Now’s their chance to—” The rest of his sentence was lost as he moved purposefully off.

Ken slipped his wad of copy paper into his pocket. “Here comes Sandy,” he said.

Most of the crowd was on its feet now, but Sandy’s red head could be seen above it, making a slow but steady way toward the sheltering tree. When he reached it, they saw that he had one hand behind him and that Mom Allen was clinging to it. Sandy swung her clear of the last knot of children and deposited her beside his father.

“There!” he said. “I told you we’d make it, Mom.” He slung his camera case from one brawny shoulder and lowered it to the ground.

Tiny Mom Allen looked serene and unruffled. “I knew we would,” she said. She smiled up at her husband. “Sandy ran excellent interference for me.”

Pop grinned. “He was probably just getting in training for fighting his way through that mob around the refreshment stand.”

Sandy shook his head. “I can’t see myself braving that crowd even for a hamburger.”

The other three Allens stared at him.

“Why, Sandy,” Mom said, “aren’t you feeling well? I never heard you abandon the thought of a hamburger before in your life.”

Ken hugged her. “Don’t worry about him, Mom,” he said, laughing.

“He knows perfectly well we can pass the Triangle Diner on the way back to town.”

“*Passing* the diner was not exactly what I had in mind,” Sandy said. He picked up his camera case and offered Ken his arm with exaggerated courtesy. “Shall we join the hamburgers at the Triangle?”

Ken tried to look helpless. “How can I resist?” he asked the others. “He’s bigger than I am.”

“Don’t look to me for sympathy,” Bert told him. “I had no choice in getting Sandy for a brother, but you deliberately picked him for yours.” He took his mother’s arm. “Come on, Mom. Let’s leave these juvenile delinquents to their fate. I’ll take you for a row in one of those new boats. You too, Pop.”

Ken and Sandy watched the three Allens move off before they turned to make their own way to the red convertible that had shared so many of their adventures. Ken was still smiling at Bert’s remark.

Automatically Ken’s thoughts raced back to that grim night when he had first stumbled into the office of the Brentwood *Advance*. He had been in desperate trouble. His father, the famous foreign correspondent Richard Holt, was being held prisoner by a vicious gang. And Ken, friendless in a strange town, had not known where to turn.

Ken could never have asked the Allens-or any other strangers-for the kind of help they gave him. But they gave it without being asked, standing shoulder to shoulder with Ken until his father was safe once more. And when that adventure was over-the one that came to be known as *The Secret of Skeleton Island*-Mom Allen had insisted that Ken move in with her family.

Sometimes, Ken couldn’t believe in his luck. He had been motherless for years until Mom Allen, and Pop too, accepted him as another son. Bert and Sandy both treated him as a brother. Now the Allen house was Richard Holt’s real headquarters when he came home from his trips, even though he still maintained an apartment in New York. And now, instead of living at boarding schools while his father was away, Ken had a real home.

Ken glanced up at his big redheaded friend. They had had a good many adventures together since Ken joined the Allens. During the most recent one, which they called *The Mystery of the Iron Box*, Sandy’s strength and courage had been a bulwark against threatening perils.

“What are you thinking about?” Sandy demanded.

“Who’s thinking?”

“You are,” Sandy said. “I can always tell by that peculiar expression you get.”

“If you must know,” Ken said, “I was thinking about what Bert

said. I didn't do so badly in picking you for a brother. I'd do it over again if I--

"All right," Sandy broke in. "Never mind." His face was as red as his hair.

Ken was grinning. He knew Sandy couldn't take either gratitude or compliments. "You asked me," he pointed out.

Sandy ignored him. They had reached the car, and the redhead, obviously eager to change the subject, bent down to study the left front tire.

"Baby could use a new set of shoes," he said.

"We haven't spent that last check from Global yet," Ken reminded him. "That ought to buy new tires."

"Right," Sandy agreed. "Good old Global News."

Global News was the world-wide news agency for which Richard Holt worked. Its New York manager, Steve Granger, was constantly warning the boys not to get into trouble, but he just as regularly insisted that Global have the exclusive right to Ken's stories and Sandy's pictures of their various adventures.

Sandy dumped his camera case onto the back seat, slid beneath the wheel, and eased out of the still-crowded parking lot. A few minutes later he pulled to a halt in front of the Triangle Diner a mile away.

A wave of hot air greeted the boys as they entered.

The man behind the counter looked up. "Ha!" he said. "The demon newshawks." He shouted toward the kitchen. "Lock up the icebox!"

"The icebox sounds like a good idea," Sandy said. "It's like an oven in here, Nick. What happened to your air conditioning?"

Nick sighed. "The same thing that always happens on a really hot day. It broke down." He turned toward the grill. "Four hamburgers as usual, huh?"

"That's right," Ken told him. "But I think we'll eat them out in the car."

Nick nodded. "I would if I were you. Wish I could cook them outside too. Must be over a hundred in here."

"Don't forget the milk," Sandy said. "And I think maybe blueberry pie with vanilla ice cream."

Half an hour later, out in the convertible, Sandy put his empty glass down on the tray.

"That's better," he said. "Now I have the strength to face printing up those shots of His Honor."

"I'll take the stuff back in." Ken opened the car door and reached for the tray of crumpled napkins and empty dishes.

A raucous horn blasted at them from the highway. Sandy waved and Ken looked over his shoulder at the huge trailer truck going by toward Brentwood.

“Ralph Conner,” Sandy said.

“Driving pretty slowly.”

Sandy narrowed his eyes to look after the truck already shadowy in the rapidly falling dusk. “The Conner brothers are being extra careful these days,” he said. “They’ve had such a run of accidents lately that they’re taking no chances.”

A few minutes later Sandy flicked on his headlights and the convertible too moved down the highway toward Brentwood. But about two miles beyond the diner Sandy put his hand out and edged into the left lane.

“Let’s take the old road,” he said. “Less traffic.”

He swung into the narrow thoroughfare that was little used since the new state highway into Brentwood had been completed.

“Funny to think this was ever a major highway,” Ken said. “Just two narrow lanes and almost no shoulders.”

“It certainly used to be jammed up,” Sandy told him. He fed the car a little more gas as it approached the mile-long straight upgrade pull over Sugarloaf Hill. “If a single car got stalled along here, in a heavy flow of traffic, it caused—”

He broke off suddenly and bent forward. Ken had seen it too—a sudden flash of light far above them near the crest of the hill. It died out as quickly as it had appeared.

“I thought—” Sandy began.

A furious burst of red flame erupted from the hill again, flaring high and wide as if the whole wooded crown were ablaze.

Sandy’s foot jammed hard against the accelerator and the convertible leaped forward. The speedometer needle crawled higher even as the incline increased. The motor roared. The dark empty stretch of road beneath their wheels fell away behind them as if by magic.

“Is there a house up there?” Ken asked.

Sandy didn’t answer. In scarcely more than a minute he had brought the convertible to within a hundred feet of the crest, and the tires screamed as he pulled it to a dead stop. Both boys were out of the car and running for the edge of the road even before the car’s engine roar died.

Just beyond the narrow shoulder, on the right of the road, the ground dropped abruptly away into a gully overgrown with small trees and underbrush. Fifty feet below the level of the road lay a trailer truck, turned on its side, its free wheels still spinning slowly. Its tractor, a short distance away, was also on its side. And from its smashed fuel tanks the inflammable liquid poured down the hillside like a river of fire.

In the glare of the angry red light it was easy to read the big black

letters on the trailer. They spelled out the words CONNER BROTHERS TRUCKING COMPANY.

For a moment the boys stood poised at the top of the gully. And then suddenly Sandy was plunging down the steep incline.

“Ralph must be trapped in the cab!” he shouted over his shoulder.

Half sliding, half tumbling, Ken went down after him.

Shielding their faces from the heat with upraised arms, they circled the cab to approach it from windward.

“Lucky it’s Diesel fuel-not gasoline,” Sandy gasped. “At least she won’t blow up.”

He ripped off his jacket, twisted it over his arm as a shield, and climbed over the cab to the left door, now facing upward like a hatchway. For a moment he twisted at the handle.

“Jammed fast!”

He dropped off the truck as a wave of flame licked close with a shift of the wind. Then he clambered up for another try. This time he succeeded. The door wrenched open with a screech of metal.

Ken was already beside him and they looked inside at Ralph Conner slumped unconscious against the right door of the cab. Even in the lurid glow of the fire the man’s face looked white.

Ken lowered himself through the door Sandy had opened, and wriggling under the steering wheel, slid down the now perpendicular seat until he was beside Conner.

The truck driver was a big man. When Ken first put his hands beneath his arms and tried to lift, Conner seemed a dead and immovable weight. Ken tried again, his eyes half shut against the glare and the fierce heat.

Conner moved slightly. Ken kept tugging. Sandy’s long arms reached down to help. And finally Ken could feel Sandy taking the bulk of the weight.

“O.K. I’ve got him!” Sandy gasped. “Get up here and hold the door open. I’ll pull him through.”

Somehow, between them, they got the inert body through the door and lowered to the ground. They didn’t wait to catch their breath. They picked Conner up again and staggered with him along the sharply slanting ground until they were a safe distance from the blazing tractor. There, panting, they eased their burden to the ground.

Ken sank to his knees beside him. “He’s breathing,” he reported. “You stay here with him and I’ll go for help.”

“Right at the foot of the hill on the far side,” Sandy told him. “There’s a store there with a phone.”

Brentwood itself lay just beyond the foot of the hill on that side. Fifteen minutes was enough to bring sirens screaming their way to the scene. Searchlights from the fire trucks lighted the whole gully as two

stretcher-bearers carried Conner to a waiting ambulance. Streams of white foam blanketed the oil fire, and men roamed the underbrush beating out the smaller blazes that had sprung up in a dozen places.

Andy Kane, summoned by radio, had his hands full keeping the narrow road clear of curiosity seekers so that the firemen could do their job.

Finally, just as Sandy took his fifth picture of the scene, Chief Kane cornered both the boys. "Thought you'd like to know," he said. "I just got a radio message from headquarters that Ralph's all right-no bones broken. Just shaken up and bruised. But it was lucky for him you two were here in time to haul him out." He nodded toward the tractor which was now a twisted mass of blackened, smoking metal.

"How'd it happen, anyway?" Chief Kane went on. "You must have been close behind him."

"We weren't that close," Ken explained. "We were at the bottom of the hill when we saw the first flash. It died away, and then a couple of seconds later the whole top of the hill seemed to be on fire."

Kane nodded. "Often happens that way. The fuel hits a hot exhaust pipe, vaporizes, and flares up, burning all the fumes. Then a few seconds later it starts again. So you didn't see him go over?" he added. "You don't know how it happened?"

Both boys shook their heads.

"We have no idea at all," Ken said.

"Well, I guess Ralph can tell me himself, if he's in as good shape as they say." Chief Kane shook his head sadly. "Sure having a run of bad luck, aren't they-those two boys?"

"We were just talking about it tonight," Sandy said. "That reminds me-I ought to call Bert so he can get over to the hospital. Mort and Ralph are his best friends."

"He knows about it," Chief Kane told him. "He was with me at the lake when I heard about it. Went right up to the hospital from there."

An hour later, back at the office, Ken and Sandy had managed to wash off some of the worst grime, and Ken had smeared salve over a burn on Sandy's wrist.

"Bert will get an account of the accident from Ralph," Sandy was saying, "so we won't have to-" He broke off as Chief Kane, Pop Allen, and Bert entered.

"Glad we found you here," Kane said abruptly. "I'm pretty peeved with you two. Why didn't you tell me about the car that passed Ralph? It must have passed you too. If I'd known right away I might have sent out an alarm and stopped it. Now it's probably too late."

Ken and Sandy stared at him.

"There wasn't any car," Sandy said. "Nothing passed us at all on the way up the hill. What-?"

Bert interrupted him. His voice sounded tense and strained. "Of course there was a car," he said. "It came right at Ralph as he got near the crest-forced him off the road. And since there's no turnoff between the top of the hill and at the bottom where you were, it must have passed you too as it went on down. What kind of reporters are you, anyway, to miss a thing like that? Or are you just trying to be funny?"

Sandy flared up. "We're not trying to be funny-and I don't think you're very funny either. I told you no car passed us on that road and that's the truth."

"Sandy's right," Ken said quietly. "If a car drove Ralph off the road it must have sprouted wings and flown away, because it certainly never came on down the hill past us."

CHAPTER II

UNCONVINCING STORY

Police Chief Kane looked from the boys to Bert and then back again.

"Ralph says there was a car," he said slowly. "And you two say there wasn't. I don't get it."

"There must have been a car!" Bert banged his fist on a desk in emphasis.

"Take it easy, son." Pop sat down in his creaking old chair and reached for his pipe.

"Well, Ralph doesn't lie!" Bert said angrily.

"We don't either!" Sandy retorted.

"Now-now." Pop tamped tobacco into his pipe. "Why should anybody be lying? There was a car at the top of the hill, but it never came down past the boys. Seems pretty obvious to me that it turned around and went back down the other side instead."

"Of course!" Relief flooded Bert's face. "Why didn't I think of that? That must have been what happened. Sorry, Sandy-and you too, Ken."

"But, Bert," Sandy began, "it couldn't have-" He stopped suddenly.

"What were you going to say?" Chief Kane asked.

"Er-I was just wondering if Ralph saw anything that would help you identify the car."

Ken realized that Sandy had changed his mind about what he had started to say, but no one else seemed to notice.

Chief Kane shook his head. "Ralph said he couldn't see anything except the glaring headlights," he said. He picked his cap up from the desk where he had dropped it. "Well, I guess I'd better be getting along. Too bad I can't send out an alarm tonight, but we can't hunt for a car we can't describe." He grinned at Sandy and Ken. "Sorry I snapped at you two. So long, folks."

There was silence in the office for a moment when the door shut behind him.

Then Sandy said, "Bert, listen-and don't blow your top, please. I didn't want to say this in front of the chief, because I don't think Ralph would lie any more than you do. But that car couldn't have turned around and gone down the other side of the hill."

Bert's hand, relaxed on the desk top, suddenly clenched into a fist. But his voice was even. "What do you mean-it couldn't have?" he asked.

Sandy eyed him steadily. "We saw the first flash of the fire when we were just at the foot of the hill. We kept our eyes on the road

ahead of us from that moment on. And we were at the top-or rather at the spot where the truck went over, about a hundred feet short of the top-in just about one minute flat. Right, Ken?"

Ken nodded without speaking.

"So we would have seen the car if it came down the hill toward us," Sandy went on. "And we would have seen it if it turned around at the top. It would have had to back at least twice, to make the turn on such a narrow road. We couldn't have helped noticing the headlights swinging around. And we didn't see anything, Bert-not a single thing."

Bert leaned forward, his eyes flashing. But Pop spoke before he did.

"All right," he said calmly. "That's your version, in detail. Now suppose you tell us exactly what Ralph says, Bert. Tell us everything he told you and the chief."

Bert took a deep breath. "O.K.," he said. "Ralph says he was going up Sugarloaf Hill at about thirty miles an hour. That's the best he could do on that grade, even if he'd wanted to go faster. He was almost at the crest-a hundred feet or so from the sign warning trucks to go downhill in low gear-when headlights came up over the top toward him. Ralph says they were coming right at him, head on, in his lane. He blew his horn and slammed on his brakes. The car kept coming. So Ralph swung to the right, though he knew about the gully there and knew he couldn't go very far off the road without crashing. But the oncoming car swung the same way, as if it were deliberately aiming at him."

Bert took another deep breath and then went on. "That's about the story. Ralph felt himself jog onto the shoulder. The car was still curving right at him. It was too late to try to swing the other way. The truck began to pitch downward into the gully-and the next thing Ralph knew he was waking up in the hospital."

Bert flattened his two hands on the desk. "That's the way Ralph tells it. Either you believe him or you don't."

The room was uncomfortably quiet for a moment.

Then Sandy said, "Why do you keep talking about believing or not believing? We don't have any reason for not telling the truth, and Ralph doesn't either. The Conner trucks and cargoes are all insured, aren't they? And the insurance company will make good whether a car drove Ralph off the road or not."

Bert opened and closed his mouth twice before he answered. Pop was looking at him sympathetically.

"That's the whole trouble, of course," Bert said finally. "Ralph has plenty of reason for refusing to take the blame for the wreck-for saying he was shoved off the road." Once more his fist hit the desk. "But I still don't think he'd lie about it."

"What are you driving at?" Sandy asked.

"Just this," Bert said. "About four months ago a wheel came off one of the Conner trucks and it plowed into a bank. The truck was badly damaged and most of the load was lost. The insurance company had to make good. Then, about three weeks later, when one of their big trailers was carrying a load of cement, the tarpaulin came loose and the cement got ruined by a downpour. The insurance company had to make good on that too. Next a brake line broke-another wreck. And finally, just last week, they lost a load of vegetables because the refrigeration unit in the trailer went bad. That one alone must have cost the insurance company plenty."

"Yes, I know," Sandy said quietly. "Mort and Ralph have certainly been having a run of bad luck. But--"

"But," Bert broke in, "the point is that Mort Conner's insurance agent told him last week that the company was seriously considering canceling the boys' insurance."

Sandy stared at him. "But a trucking company can't operate without insurance!"

"Exactly," Pop agreed. "If Ralph's accident tonight was caused by some crazy driver shoving him off the road, the insurance company can't accuse him of carelessness. But ..." Pop let his voice die away.

Bert finished the sentence. "But if the insurance company can claim that there was no oncoming car-that Ralph fell asleep or something-then their insurance will certainly be lost. And that'll mean the end of the Conner Brothers Trucking Company-the end of five years of hard work."

"Couldn't they insure themselves with another company?" Ken asked.

Pop looked doubtful. "It's pretty unlikely, Ken. If one company feels the Conners are a bad risk, other companies would probably feel the same way."

Sandy whistled softly. "No wonder you were angry, Bert. Our testimony can mean the end of the Conner business."

"That's about it," Bert said gruffly. Then he attempted a smile. "Just the same I had no right to blow my top at you. If you didn't see a car, you can't say you did."

"But, Bert," Sandy said suddenly, "who's going to ask us to testify? There isn't going to be any lawsuit or--"

"You'll be asked, all right," Bert broke in firmly. "The insurance adjuster will talk to Andy Kane. He'll look at the police record and find you two were on the scene within seconds after the truck burst into flames. Then he'll come to you."

"We don't have to talk to him," Sandy said defiantly. "Nobody can make us."

“Don’t be a chump,” Bert told him. “If you refuse to talk you’d only be making it worse for the Connors. The insurance people would be sure, then, that there was something fishy about the accident.”

“Wait a second!” Pop said suddenly. They all turned to look at him. “Something you just said gave me an idea, Bert. You said the boys were on the scene ‘within seconds after the truck burst into flames.’”

“That’s what they’ve been saying,” Bert said. “They-“

“I know.” His father interrupted him. “They saw the first flash and reached the top of the hill about a minute later. But how do we know that the flash happened the very instant the truck went over into the gully? How do we know the truck hadn’t gone over before that?”

There was a moment of startled silence.

Then Bert jumped to his feet. “Of course! That’s it! You said,” he turned toward the boys, “that no oncoming car would have been able to turn around and get away without your seeing it. But if the truck was lying in the gully for two or three minutes before the fire broke out, the car would have had plenty of time to make a getaway before you even reached the bottom of the hill-before you could see the crest of the hill at all. That’s the answer!”

All three Allens looked so relieved that Ken hesitated to speak. He knew how close they were to the Connors -how much this meant to all of them.

“But wouldn’t it help,” he asked slowly, “if we could think of some good reason *why* the car would turn around?”

“Why wouldn’t it?” Bert demanded. “The driver probably realized he had caused a serious accident and decided he didn’t want to face the consequences.”

“But why would he turn around?” Ken prodded. “He could get away faster if he kept on in the direction he was going.”

“Hmm,” Pop muttered. “That’s a point.”

“Maybe he saw our lights,” Sandy suggested, “and didn’t want to pass anybody who might be able to identify him.”

“But if he saw our lights,” Ken countered, “why didn’t we see his?”

“Because he turned his out and-No, he wouldn’t do that,” Sandy interrupted himself. “Nobody would risk driving that narrow hill road without lights. But how about this?”

He leaned forward. “Mr. X drives up over the hill, sees the big truck coming, and gets rattled. He loses control of his car and forces Ralph off the edge. Mr. X finally gets his brakes on and stops. The fire hasn’t started yet, but he realizes he may have caused a fatal accident. He decides to get away fast. But before he even starts up again he sees our lights, way down at the bottom of the grade. So he turns around-maybe he even does it with his lights off, if he’s really scared enough-

and makes off back the way he'd come, toward Brentwood. Then the first flash of the fire happens-and from that second on we're starting up the road. But he's already over the crest and on his way."

Ken could feel the others' eyes on him.

"You're right," he said. "It could have happened that way. And if Mr. X did turn around up there, we ought to be able to find some sign of his tires in the gravel of the shoulder." He tried to make his voice sound more hopeful than he felt. "Let's go up and look tomorrow morning. That way--"

"That won't do any good," Bert interrupted. He was looking grim again. "There were a hundred cars along there tonight-fire trucks, police cars, sight-seers. The shoulders will be full of tire marks."

"Don't worry, Bert." Sandy reached over and punched his brother's arm with a light fist. "It must have happened the way I said. The insurance adjuster will believe it if he isn't completely crazy."

But later that night, when the lights were out in the boys' bedroom, Sandy spoke out of the darkness.

"You don't believe that reconstruction of mine, do you?"

Ken stirred in his own bed. "It's not a question of what I believe. It's the insurance adjuster we have to worry about. The trouble is that because of all the Conners' previous accidents, the insurance people may be expecting them to concoct a yarn this time-to shift the blame onto someone else."

"I know." Sandy kicked at his rumpled sheet. "If I hadn't decided to take the back road home, we wouldn't have denied Ralph's story in the first place. If the Conners lose their business it'll be all my fault."

"Cut it out," Ken said sharply. "If you hadn't taken that road, Ralph would probably have lost his life. Just remember that, and stop worrying. Besides," he went on a moment later, "your reconstruction makes perfectly good sense. There isn't any real reason why the insurance adjuster shouldn't believe it."

"Oh, sure," Sandy muttered. "You don't."

"Well, we're not going to do anybody any good by stewing over it all night," Ken pointed out. "We'll find out Monday when the insurance man gets here."

They found out Sunday morning.

Mort, the older of the two Conners, called them at ten to ask them to come over to his house right away, if they could make it. They found Ralph there too, bruised but otherwise unhurt, stretched out on the living-room couch. Mort was with him and Mort's young wife, Ruth, was hovering uneasily out of sight in the kitchen.

A fourth person was there too-a Mr. Barton, the insurance adjuster.

"I thought I'd get this straightened out as quickly as possible," Barton said as soon as the introductions had been made. "As I

understand it from Kane, your police chief, there was some slight confusion as to the cause of last night's accident."

"Only at first," Sandy said quickly. "Ken and I here hadn't seen any car pass us, but we realized right away how that could have happened."

"Really?" Barton didn't seem particularly impressed. "And how was that?"

Sandy told his story of the events as he had reconstructed them.

Barton ran a cautious finger over his small neat mustache when Sandy had finished, and then he turned to Ralph. "You say you can give us no description of the car at all?"

"That's right," Ralph admitted. "All I could see was the headlights-good bright ones-coming right at me."

Barton made a notation in his little book. "I see." He looked at Sandy again. "And you can add nothing to what you told me just now-and what you told Chief Kane?"

"That's the whole story," Sandy said. "But if you'd like to come out to Sugarloaf Hill with us now, we could explain how-"

Barton didn't bother to let him finish. "I've been out there already. I inspected the wreckage and the road."

"Then you know it could have happened just the way I told you," Sandy said.

"Certainly." Barton stood up. "It could have happened that way. There's no doubt of that."

The tone of his voice, however, left no doubt that the adjuster didn't believe a word of Sandy's story.

"Thank you for your co-operation," Barton said. "You understand, of course," he told the Conners, "that I have no authority to do anything but make a report to my company. You'll be hearing from my home office. Quite soon, I should say."

He nodded politely over his shoulder as Mort showed him to the door.

CHAPTER III

SABOTAGE?

there was silence in the Conner living room until they heard Barton's car drive off. Ralph moved on the couch so that he sat up a little straighter, groaning slightly as stiff muscles and joints protested.

Sandy was studying the toe of his left shoe. "We sure made a mess of it," he muttered.

Mort Conner sat down with a heavy sigh, but he managed to fix a lopsided grin on his face. "That kind of talk we can do without, Sandy. Ralph told the truth and you two have to do the same. That's all there is to it."

"That's right," Ralph agreed. "And incidentally I'd like you both to know I'm grateful for that little favor you did me last night. I understand it was getting pretty warm in that cab when you hauled me out." He reached for a cigarette in the pack on the table beside him. "You're worrying about the effect your evidence may have on the decision of the insurance company, aren't you? Well, just cut it out and worry instead about where I'd be today if you hadn't come along last night."

Both the boys looked uncomfortable and Ken said hastily, "What happens next, do you know? Have you made any plans?"

Mort shrugged. "We can't do a thing until we hear from the insurance company. Which," he added grimly, "shouldn't take very long if Barton's attitude is any indication."

Ken got up and motioned Sandy toward the door. "We'd better let Ralph get a little rest," he said.

"We'll keep you informed of how things go," Mort promised. "And thanks for pulling my kid brother out of the fire. I'd rather have him than a trucking company any day."

The boys felt the gloom of the Allen household the minute they walked in the door. Bert held the sports section of a New York Sunday paper in his hands, but he clearly wasn't reading it. Pop was trying to pass the time by going over his two dozen pipes, meticulously scraping out each bowl and ramming pipe cleaners through the stems. Mom looked up when the boys entered, her unspoken question clear in her expression.

Sandy shook his head. "We didn't see the car. That's the only thing he took seriously. I don't believe he thought there was a word of truth in my reconstruction."

Mom swung her gaze to Ken, who nodded reluctant agreement.

Mom set her sewing basket down with an emphatic thump.

“Something’s got to be done,” she said firmly. “Why, I’ve known the Conner boys since they were little neighborhood terrors.”

“They got a lot of help from Bert,” Pop added, “in the terror department.”

“I’m Ruth’s godmother,” Mom went on, ignoring Pop’s interruption. “For the two years she and Mort have been married she’s worked just as hard as the boys to get that business on its feet. And now they’ve got tie new baby and all. I’m not going to sit by and watch that business crash under them.”

Pop didn’t look up from his pipes. “But what can anyone do?” he muttered. “You can’t force an insurance company to carry an outfit it considers a bad risk. And the Conner record for the past four months certainly puts them under the bad risk heading.”

“But if Ralph was forced off the road last night,” Mom insisted, “it wasn’t his fault. And—”

“We know he was forced off the road, Mom,” Bert broke in. “But the insurance company will never believe it without some kind of positive proof.”

“Well, get some proof then!” Mom demanded. Her eyes flashed toward Ken and Sandy. “You two boys have been mixed up in some mighty peculiar goings-on, and somehow you’ve always managed to unravel whatever mysteries you were involved in. Well, here’s a mystery for you—one that’s real close to all of us. Put your heads together and solve it.”

Pop laid down the last of his pipes and reached over to take one of her small hands in both his large ones.

“I’m afraid there’s no mystery to solve, Mom,” he said. “Ralph’s obviously the victim of a hit-and-run driver who managed to get away with it. Hunting him down wouldn’t be a job for Ken and Sandy in any case—it would be a job for the police. But even the police can’t do anything without some clues.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Mom said unhappily. “But it does seem as if—” She broke off abruptly and got to her feet. “I’d better see how dinner’s doing.”

None of them spoke after her departure until Ken said suddenly, “Want to go for a ride, Sandy?”

“Sure,” Sandy said glumly. “Why not?”

“Let’s go out to Sugarloaf Hill,” Ken said, as they slid into the front seat of the convertible a moment later. “You can’t tell—we might just pick up something.”

“O.K. If you say so.” But Sandy’s glum expression didn’t lift.

The scene of the accident was deserted. Heat waves shimmered from the narrow pavement of the road, and the still air was heavy with the smell of burned rubber and oil. The tractor and trailer were

both still untouched, and the scar made in the gully's wall by the tumbling tons of steel was plainly visible.

Ken looked down at the blackened twisted tractor. "It's a wonder Ralph was still alive when it reached the bottom."

"Even the Connors can't have bad luck all the time," Sandy muttered. He walked a few feet along the pavement's downgrade. "Here are his skid marks," he said.

The black lines started about a hundred and twenty-five feet from the crest of the hill and ran toward it for about twenty feet.

Ken placed himself where the marks began. "This must be where Ralph was when he first saw the oncoming lights."

Sandy nodded. "He must have slammed on his brakes immediately. Any good driver does that automatically."

Sandy brightened suddenly at his own words. "But that proves he wasn't asleep!"

"How come?"

"If he was asleep and then suddenly woke up to find himself going over the bank, the skid marks would be way over to one side and heading right off the road on a slant. But these marks show he was in the middle of his lane and going straight when he applied the brakes."

"Good," Ken said. "That's one for our side." He followed the lines toward the crest and stopped at the edge of the road where the marks suddenly curved toward the shoulder. Deep gouges in the gravel showed the spot where the front wheels of the tractor had plunged over. "Looks as if he kept pulling toward the right farther and farther, trying to avoid a collision."

"That's just what he said he did," Sandy pointed out. "If Ralph hadn't been such a good driver-and such a conscientious guy-he could have braked himself to a full stop before he went down the bank. Sitting behind the wheel of that big truck, he would have known he'd be pretty sure to come out of a crack-up all right. The oncoming car would probably have been flattened like a pancake." Sandy clenched his teeth. "But Ralph thought of the other guy first-and this is the thanks he gets."

"Let's go back down the hill," Ken suggested, "just to make sure there aren't any traces of the oncoming car stopping and then backing around for a turn."

They both knew it was a useless gesture, but at least it was something to do. They walked on opposite sides of the road in the hot sun, their eyes fixed on the gravel shoulders. Within several hundred feet of the scene of the accident the shoulders were liberally scarred. At least two dozen different sets of tire marks could be distinguished.

"Our Mr. X could have turned around along here," Sandy said, "but we'll never prove it now. So did too many other people last night. And

down here,” he said a moment later, as they continued walking, “nobody turned at all. We might as well give it up. Mr. X wouldn’t have come down this far to turn, anyway.”

They went back to the convertible and returned home without speaking a word. Dinner that day was gloomy and silent. Afterward the boys went down to the *Advance* office where Ken sat and watched Sandy develop the pictures he had taken at the scene of the accident the night before. They both felt a flurry of hope when they were ready to examine the negatives with a magnifying glass, but the hope died quickly. They found nothing on the negatives that was of any help.

Finally Sandy hung the film up to dry. “Let’s go home.”

“Sure,” Ken agreed. “Maybe a glass of milk and another piece of Mom’s apple pie will make you feel better.”

“Nothing will make me feel better until I know what’s going to happen to the Conners,” Sandy said. “And I’ve got an idea I’ll feel even worse when I know.”

It was just before noon on Tuesday when Mort and Ralph came into the *Advance* office.

Bert leaped up from his desk and went to meet them.

“Just what we expected,” Mort said. “The insurance is canceled. The company will make good the loss of the truck and the load it was carrying. It’ll even pay Ralph’s hospital bill.” He smiled grimly. “But that’s the end. We’ve been written off their books.”

Ralph finished the story. “We’ve already tried two other agents in town, but the news has gone around. They’re not interested in our business.”

Pop spoke brusquely. “Well, what’s the program then? If there’s anything we—

Mort shook his head. “There’s nothing anybody can do, except find the car that drove Ralph off the road. And we’re not so hopeful as to think that’s likely to happen.”

Bert nodded grim agreement. “Anybody low enough to run away from an accident isn’t going to change his mind later and come back to admit it.”

Mort attempted a grin. “Probably just as well we can’t get insurance, anyway. If we could we’d be tempted to try to carry on. I doubt if we’d find many customers eager to risk their cargoes in Conner trucks from now on. No, we’re licked and we know it. We’re going to try to sell out.”

Ralph sat on the edge of a desk. “We’ve got the two light trucks and one big trailer job left. Plus, of course, our reputation for hard luck. That ought to run the price up.”

“I suppose we should have sold the business when we had that chance six months ago,” Mort said. “We were offered a good price

then. Now-" He shrugged. "We'll be lucky if our garage and the rolling stock bring in enough to pay our obligations."

"I didn't know you'd considered selling six months ago," Pop said.

"We didn't," Ralph assured him. "But we got an offer, then, through some broker in New York. He said he had a client who would like to buy us out." He shook his head. "But we were sitting on top of the world then-just out of the red, finally, and going great guns. We turned him down so fast it must have made his head spin."

"I'm planning to go in and see that broker right away," Mort said, with an effort at briskness. "There's just a chance his client is still looking for a trucking business. At least he'll get quite a bargain now."

"And what about you and Ralph?" Pop asked.

"We know better than to look for truck-driving jobs around here," Mort said. "Nobody would hire us right now. But trucking's the thing we know best-and I've got a friend who's in charge of the trucking on a big road job down in South America. Maybe he'll take us on. The pay is good."

Ralph turned on his brother. "You're not taking any South American job, bud. You've got a wife and a child and you know they couldn't go along with you. I'll take that job and keep us all going until something breaks up here."

"Oh, no, you don't!" Mort told him.

"Oh, yes, I do! Remember, I'm the straw that broke the camel's back. I was at the wheel last night when-"

Mort put a hand on Ralph's arm. "Let's cut it out," he said. "We don't have to do our squabbling in front of the Allens. They've had enough of our troubles as it is. I'm going down to the garage. Coming?"

"I'll be along in a minute," Ralph said. "You go ahead."

He waited until Mort had gone and then he turned to Pop. "Maybe you people can do something to convince him," he said desperately. "He'll listen to Mrs. Allen when he won't listen to anybody else. He didn't just think of that South American deal. He was talking about it first thing this morning and he's set on it. But he's got no business going down there. It's different with me. I'm a bachelor. And the pay really is good enough so that I could carry Mort and his family until we figured out something solid."

He paused for a moment. "What Mort didn't mention about that job," he said then, "is that it's not something a person can take for a couple of months. They're signing up all employees on a two-year contract. Why, if Mort was down there, he couldn't come home if Ruth or the baby got sick! He just can't be allowed to go, that's all."

Pop nodded soberly. "I think you're right. Of course Mort's a stubborn boy-always has been. But I know Mom will do what she can.

You can count on that."

"Look, Ralph," Bert said, "if it's a matter of a loan until Mort gets started on something--"

Ralph grinned. "You ought to know how Mort feels about borrowing money. I don't think he had a good night's sleep all during the first four years of our business-he was so worried over what we owed the bank. He acted as if the whole world had been lifted off his shoulders when we finally got that note paid off." He shook his head. "No, Mort won't borrow money-not if there's any other way out."

He stood up. "But thanks, anyway. And I'd better get going now. I don't want Mort wondering what I was doing here for so long."

The door of the *Advance* office swung shut behind him.

Pop sighed heavily. "Sometimes," he said, "I almost believe that old superstition about hard luck running in cycles. There doesn't seem to be any other explanation for what's happened to the Connors the last four months, right up through this final loss of everything they've worked for."

Ken had been sitting by in silence. Now he got up and crossed the room to the water cooler. He turned with a paper cup in his hand. "There's always some other explanation for what people call hard luck, Pop-you've told me so yourself. In fact, you said it was usually just plain bad management."

"Now wait a minute, Ken!" Bert said angrily. "If you're accusing the Connors of bad management and carelessness--"

Ken broke off in the middle of a swallow to interrupt. "I'm not accusing them of anything," he said. "But look: front wheels don't come off by themselves. A cotter pin holds the nut in place and the nut can't be taken off until the cotter pin is removed. So if a front wheel comes off, the way it did in that first accident of theirs, it was either because the cotter pin broke-which is pretty unusual-or because the cotter pin hadn't been put through the nut in the first place. And the Connors do their own maintenance work, don't they?"

There was complete silence in the office. From the rear room came the faint clicking of the linotype machines. The door from the shop opened and Hank, the print-shop foreman, stuck his head through. But when he saw the three pairs of angry eyes focused on Ken he hurriedly withdrew and shut the door again.

Ken went on stubbornly. "Who tied the tarpaulin over the cement? Who checks their brakes and the refrigeration equipment on the big trailer? The Connors do it themselves, don't they?"

"Now, Ken," Pop said evenly, "I grant you that these accidents could all be blamed on faulty mechanical checkups. But, on the other hand, even the best checking can't guarantee that something won't go wrong five minutes after the check is completed."

“And you certainly can’t say Ralph was careless last night-to deliberately crash down an embankment and avoid a head-on collision,” Bert snapped out.

“I said I wasn’t accusing them of anything and that includes carelessness,” Ken answered. “The Conners have always been careful drivers and good mechanics. Their record up to a few months ago proves that. But suddenly things begin to happen-things that shouldn’t happen to careful drivers and good mechanics. At least not so many things in so short a time. So if the Conners didn’t suddenly become careless drivers and sloppy mechanics-“

“Which they didn’t,” Bert interrupted. “Don’t you think they’ve double-checked everything lately?”

Ken nodded. “That’s just the point. I’m sure they did. So unless we really believe in hard luck, or unless we believe that they have suddenly become careless-“

“This thing is-!” Sandy broke in.

“Let him finish,” Pop said. “Go on, Ken. What are you leading up to?”

“The one possibility I think we’ve been ignoring,” Ken answered. “The possibility that somebody-not the Conners-has been deliberately causing these accidents. In such a way,” he added, “that their business would crash, just as it’s doing.”

CHAPTER IV

NO GLIMMER OF LIGHT

The big clock on the wall registered a full, slow minute after Ken's speech. The three Allens were still staring at him but they no longer looked angry. Sandy's expression had become one of amazed excitement. Pop and Bert were frankly incredulous.

"Deliberately caused accidents!" Bert finally said in a voice heavy with scorn. "If this whole thing weren't such a tragedy for the Conners, I'd be laughing out loud."

"I wouldn't laugh too loud if I were you," Sandy said defensively. "I can remember several occasions in the past when you laughed at one of Ken's ideas and woke up to find yourself--"

"Never mind, Sandy." Pop stopped the argument before it got started. "This is no time for that." He turned to Ken. "I see your point," he said, "and I wouldn't discount it right off the bat just on the grounds that it sounds melodramatic. But why would anyone in his right mind do such a thing, Ken? What would be the motive behind trying to drive the Conners out of business?"

"I don't know," Ken admitted. He looked at Bert a little sheepishly. "You don't know of anybody who hates the Conners enough to do a thing like this to them?"

"Of course not," Bert said instantly. "Why, Mort and Ralph have lived around here all their lives, the same as we have. But unlike the Allens"--Bert grinned a little-- "they mind their own business. They just don't make enemies. Ask anybody in Brentwood."

"They don't have any business rivals who might like to see them fold up?" Ken asked.

Pop took it up. "The Conners' only competition is Ray Johnson's outfit, Ken. And he's a good friend of theirs. There's plenty of business for both of them. They frequently help each other out during the busiest seasons."

"Then what about an ex-employee?" Ken asked again. "Somebody Mort and Ralph fired at some time or other?"

"Pretty unlikely," Bert replied. "I don't think they ever had more than two extra men--maybe three at a rush time like Christmas. I can't remember just who's worked for them, but I know the Conners wouldn't ever hire a temporary employee without letting the man know ahead of time that it was a short-term job. Of course there's Vic, their mechanic, who drives for them once in a while. But he's been with them almost from the beginning and still is. He wouldn't be fool enough to ruin the company and destroy his own job."

“Still,” Sandy said, “we might check with Ralph about that. There might be somebody they hired for a little while and then let go. Even if they thought they’d made it clear that the job was temporary, the man himself might not have understood-or might have had some special reason of his own not to like them.”

“People have done some pretty desperate things for revenge,” Ken said. “Even when the reason seems small and unimportant to everybody else. If Ralph or Mort ever complained about a man’s work, or-“

Hank stuck his head in the door again, this time waving a sheaf of proof sheets at Pop. “How about an O.K. on these ads? Or have you given up the idea of putting out a newspaper around here?”

Pop took the sheets, muttering under his breath. He glanced through them rapidly, made several scrawled notations in the margins, and handed them back. “Pull a new proof on the McGraw ad,” he told Hank, “and then get his O.K. on it.”

“Check.” Hank cast an aggrieved look at the boys. “And when do you think we might have the pictures of that playground dedication? And of Saturday night’s accident-if you’re planning to run something on that?”

Sandy grinned at him. “You’ll have them by three this afternoon, you old slave driver.”

“I’ll just keep my fingers crossed until then,” Hank told him as he went back into the shop.

Pop swung purposefully toward his typewriter, and then turned back to Ken. “I don’t know as we’re getting anywhere with this discussion,” he said. “And Hank’s right-we’ve got some work to do. But finish what you were saying when he came in, Ken.”

“Well,” Ken said, “it’s just that I agree with you when you said nobody in his right mind would be likely to start a deliberate program of sabotage against the Connors. Certainly if we include Saturday night’s accident in the picture, I’ll agree that a man would have to be insane to head right at a big truck in the hope of driving it off the road. He was running too great a risk of committing suicide himself.”

“Exactly,” Pop said.

“But I thought maybe there was such a person around here,” Ken explained, “a person so angry at the Connors that he was at least temporarily out of his mind.”

Bert too turned back to his typewriter. “I’m afraid you’re way off, Ken. If there was anybody like that around, I think the Connors would have been aware of him, and on guard.”

“But, Bert,” Sandy said argumentatively, “you can’t be sure-can you?-that there isn’t-“

“Look,” Bert interrupted, “if you two are such smart detectives, go

find that car that drove Ralph off the road. And stop—

“Let’s all stop. Right now.” Pop’s voice was firm. “Sandy, you’d better get those pictures ready for Hank. And, Ken, I’ll need that dedication story pretty soon. We can theorize some more this evening, but right now I think a little work is in order.”

“Sure, Pop.” Sandy got to his feet.

Ken, too, started obediently toward his own desk, but paused halfway. “I’ve just got one more question,” he said.

There was a noise that sounded suspiciously like a snort of disdain from Bert. But Pop looked up patiently.

“What’s that, Ken?” he asked.

“Could it be that the Conner business is so valuable that somebody would go to all this trouble to get hold of it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Mort said someone wanted to buy it six months ago,” Ken pointed out. “The boys wouldn’t sell then. But now, because of everything that’s happened, they’ll have to sell. Maybe that was the motive behind this whole thing.”

Pop’s grizzled brows knitted briefly and then straightened. “I can’t see it that way,” he said, shaking his head. “Anybody who wanted to own a trucking business could start one of his own. It would be cheaper-and a lot safer-than trying to wreck somebody else’s so he could buy it up.”

“I guess you’re right.”

Bert’s typewriter was already clattering. Ken moved on to his machine and sat down to go to work without another word. Sandy saluted him from the top of the cellar stairs and then disappeared toward his basement darkroom.

Pop was busy reading proof when Ken finished his story, so Ken dropped the typed sheets on Pop’s desk and went downstairs to see how Sandy was coming along. The big redhead answered Ken’s knock and waited until the door was shut again before he slid a new sheet of sensitized paper into the place beneath the enlarger.

“Be through here pretty soon,” Sandy muttered.

“You’ve still got plenty of time to meet your deadline.”

“That Bert,” Sandy said, after a minute. “Always laughing at our ideas until—”

“Until he’s convinced.” Ken finished the sentence. And then he backs us up to the hilt.”

Sandy’s grin was faintly discernible in the dull glow of his safelight. “I’ve got to say that much for him,” he admitted. “And I’d sure rather have him with us than against us—all two hundred and twenty pounds of him.”

He flicked on the enlarger light, counted the seconds, and flicked it

off again. "Bert, Ralph, and Mort were all on the high school football team one year. They made a six-hundred-pound backfield that was about as easy to stop as a steam roller."

"Must have been something to watch," Ken said absently. A moment later he said, "Let's go over and talk to Ralph again when you finish up here. Something's bothering me about the story he told."

"What?"

"I wish I knew. I just have a feeling ..." He let his voice trail off. Then he said, "You don't believe in the vengeful-employee theory, or the possibility that somebody ruined the business so it could be bought cheaply. Do you?"

"I can't quite believe either of them," Sandy admitted reluctantly. "But I still think you're on the right track. The more I think about it, the less I believe in just plain hard luck. And I certainly don't think the Connors are as careless as they'd have to be for all those things to happen."

Sandy flicked a picture out of the developer, inspected it briefly under the yellow light, and then flipped it into the second solution. "I'll be finished in a couple of minutes and then we'll go see Ralph. Maybe your hunch will pay off."

When they left the *Advance* office they walked the short distance to Brentwood's Main Street and turned right. Halfway down the block Sandy motioned Ken into a narrow passageway alongside the Brentwood City Bank.

"Short cut," he murmured. "It's too hot today to walk all the way around."

At the far end of the bank's windowless wall they emerged into an alley that separated the rear walls of the buildings on Main Street from the rear walls of those on the next parallel city street, North First Avenue, on which the Conner garage fronted. Almost opposite them stood the back door of the garage, open to catch the stray June breezes.

They blinked for a moment in the dimness of the garage as they stepped over the threshold.

"Over here!"

They blinked again, and then saw Ralph waving a grimy hand at them from the workbench at the rear of the garage.

"I'm doing a little work on the rolling stock," he said. "What there is left of it!" His voice sounded determinedly cheerful.

There were three vehicles in the garage—a light delivery truck, a two-and-a-half-ton open job whose flat platform body was ringed by removable slatted panels, and the massive Diesel-powered twin of the tractor that still lay in ruins on Sugarloaf Hill. Through the open overhead doors that formed the entire front of the garage the boys

could see the tractor's long aluminum trailer, parked in the yard outside.

"What can the Conner Trucking Company do for the Brentwood *Advance*?" Ralph asked.

Ken and Sandy had decided on the way over to ask Ralph first about the Conners' previous employees. Sandy prefaced the questions by a quick summary of Ken's ideas on the subject.

"The first point is," Ken said then, "whether somebody could have managed to prepare the grounds for the accidents-not counting the one last night, for the minute. Would it have been possible?"

Ralph had recovered from his first surprise at Ken's theory. He wiped his hands thoughtfully on a piece of waste before he answered the question.

"Sure," he said slowly. "I guess so. You know how it is in Brentwood. Nobody worries much about theft or anything like that. I suppose we've often left the garage open briefly when nobody was here-even when we had loaded trucks around. But who would do such a thing? It seems so crazy."

"I know, Ken agreed. "But how about somebody you might have fired?"

Ralph shook his head. "You're barking up the wrong tree there. Vic's been our only full-time steady employee, and he's been with us from almost the beginning right up until now. In fact, if his brother-in-law didn't want to use Vic on his farm this summer, he'd be about as hard hit by all of this as we are. We've taken on extra help at Christmas time, of course, but they've always been college boys on vacation. None of them had any grudges against us-I'm sure of that."

Ken looked questioningly toward the little office partitioned off in one corner of the vast room.

Ralph answered his silent query. "Ruth's always done our clerical work," he explained. "Even before she and Mort were married she helped us with that. So we've never had a clerk. And that's the lot."

"And you can't think of anybody in town who might have it in for you and Mort?" Ken asked.

Ralph shook his head. "Not a soul."

"That's what Bert said," Sandy murmured.

Ken hesitated. "Look, Ralph," he said then, "would you mind going over the whole story again?"

Ralph looked surprised. "I wouldn't mind," he said. "I don't know what good it will do, but if you're willing to waste your time, the least I can do is co-operate. Where do you want me to begin?"

"Where you waved to us at the diner," Ken said.

Ralph reached for a cigarette and they all settled down on the upturned boxes that served as seats in the garage.

“Well, let’s see,” Ralph said, half shutting his eyes. “I went down the highway to the junction with the old road, pulled over to the middle lane, blinked my direction indicators and waited for a break in the oncoming traffic. When I got the chance I moved across and headed for home over the old road.”

“Did a car pass you then?” Ken asked.

Ralph shook his head. “You mean coming in the opposite direction?”

“Any direction,” Ken said.

Ralph thought for a moment and then nodded abruptly. “I remember now. A car did turn off the highway right behind me and passed me a couple of seconds afterward. It was going a lot faster than I was.”

“Recognize the car?” Ken asked.

Ralph shook his head again. “I didn’t pay much attention to it. But I think if it was anybody I knew, I might have noticed. O.K.?” At Ken’s nod he went on. “Well, I just kept going. I remember feeling glad that I was so close to home. It was hot and I was thirsty. When I hit the grade, of course, I kept shifting down because I was carrying a heavy load. I was doing about thirty-five on the lower half of the grade, but about midway up-where it gets a little steeper-I dropped to thirty. Guess I was doing slightly less than that at the top, when the car came at me.”

“Don’t skip anything,” Ken broke in. “Take it foot by foot.”

Ralph scratched his ear. “There isn’t much to tell. When I was about a hundred feet from the warning sign-the one telling trucks to go into low gear for the downgrade-I suddenly saw these lights coming over the top right at me. I-“

“Hold it,” Ken interrupted. “You didn’t have any warning at all before that of an approaching car? You just suddenly saw its headlights?”

“That’s right,” Ralph agreed. “One second there was nothing but darkness ahead of me. The next second there was a pair of headlights dead in front of me. I began to blow my horn and apply the brakes.”

“And you’re sure you saw nothing at all until the lights flashed into your eyes?”

“Sure I’m sure.” Ralph sounded a little irritated by Ken’s insistence.

“O.K. Thanks,” Ken said. “I just wanted to be certain.”

“So I began to pull to the right,” Ralph went on, “and the oncoming car swerved to my right too. I didn’t have far to go, of course-that road’s narrow. The other car was still curving toward the shoulder as fast as I was when my wheels left the road and over I went.” He waited a moment. “Did you learn anything new?” he asked, grinning slightly.

Ken grinned back. "It sounds like the same story," he said, "even to my acutely trained ears."

Sandy waited until he and Ken were on their way back to the *Advance* office before he said, "Well? Something still bothering you about Ralph's story?"

"He said what I was listening for-without knowing I was listening for it," Ken told him. "Those lights came at him *suddenly*. At the top of a hill like that wouldn't he have seen some kind of a warning glow first?"

Sandy's eyes widened and then narrowed thoughtfully. "He might have. There wasn't any fog to reflect the lights back down that night, but even so-" His steps quickened. "You may have something there. Let's go out and check it for ourselves as soon as it gets dark." Then he stopped and turned toward Ken. "But if we find that Ralph should have seen a glow-and he still says he didn't-then what? Is that going to prove there never was a car there that night at all?"

"Let's worry about what it means when we've checked our facts," Ken said.

It was just nine thirty that night when Sandy stopped the convertible about halfway up Sugarloaf Hill. Behind them, in the valley, the lights of Brentwood twinkled. Ahead of them, pale in their headlights, the road lifted to the crest just beyond which Ralph had crashed.

Ken got out. "I'll walk on up to the top and blink my flashlight at you to let you know when I get there. After that give me three minutes to reach the spot on the other side where the skid marks begin-where Ralph says he got his first sight of the oncoming headlights. Then you drive up toward the crest at an even thirty miles an hour. I'll start my stop watch the instant I see any glow-if I do."

Ten minutes later Ken stood at the spot where Ralph's skid marks began. He was facing the crest of the hill. His finger was on the release Dutton of his chronometer.

A few moments afterward he saw a faint wave of light wash over the trees and rocks that bordered the road at the crest. He set the stop watch in motion.

The glow grew brighter. The bank rising sharply on the left side of the road threw back the light, and the low bushes edging the rim of the gully on the right were outlined more and more clearly.

Then a pair of headlights, dazzling to Ken's eyes, loomed over the crest and bore down toward him. He stopped the watch and stepped over to the shoulder. When Sandy pulled up alongside and braked to a halt, Ken thrust his hand inside the car so that the light from the dash fell on the watch face.

Sandy stared at it. "Eighteen seconds," he said. He looked at Ken.

“So even if the oncoming car had been going sixty miles an hour—twice as fast as I was—Ralph should have been able to see the glow for nine seconds before he saw the lights themselves.”

Ken walked around the car and got in. Sandy released the brake and the convertible began to move downhill.

“If the glow was there,” Sandy said, after a moment’s silence, “why didn’t Ralph notice it?” His voice was sober. “He’s the careful kind of driver who notices everything. So it certainly looks as if Ralph hasn’t been telling the truth. Either there was no car, and he made up the story to protect himself and the insurance. Or he was asleep at the wheel and woke up just in time to see the headlights coming at him—and refuses to admit it for the same reason.”

“Or,” Ken said, “Ralph wasn’t asleep and there was a car, just as he said.”

“But we just proved if there had been a car he would have seen the glow before he saw the headlights!”

“Not,” Ken said slowly, “if the car was waiting for Ralph with its lights out—*deliberately waiting there with the idea of forcing him off the road!*”

CHAPTER V

HEADLIGHTS IN THE AIR

"That was a nice bit of thinking," Pop said, when Ken had finished recounting their experiment on Sugarloaf Hill.

"But it doesn't necessarily prove anything," Bert pointed out brusquely. "Ralph probably used the word *sudden* more or less loosely—not the way Ken's taking it."

Sandy spoke half-reluctantly. "Ken asked him especially if he'd had any warning of the car's approach, Bert. Ralph went over that part of the story twice—even got a little annoyed at being pestered about it. So I'm afraid that when he said *sudden* he meant just that."

Pop looked at Bert, but this time Bert had no response.

"It seems to me," Pop said then, "that the only fair thing to do is to get together with the Connors and tell them exactly what Ken and Sandy discovered on the hill." He glanced at the phone on his battered desk in the *Advance* office. "How about it? Shall I ask them if they can drop in here for a few minutes?"

No one voiced any objections. Pop dialed Mort's number.

When he hung up a few moments later, he said, "Mort's been to New York and back already. He's got a buyer for the business!"

Bert leaned forward. "So quickly? Who is it?"

Pop shook his head. "He didn't say. Just told me they'd be glad to come over and tell us about it, now that it's settled."

They all sat in silence for several minutes. Pop fiddled aimlessly with some papers. Bert twirled a pencil.

"Maybe now we shouldn't bother them with this stuff about the glow and the lights," Bert said finally. "If they've already sold out, what difference can it make?"

"A lot-maybe," Ken said. "If their customer is the same man who made an offer six months ago—"

Bert laughed shortly. "Still hankering after that deep-laid plot you dreamed up, Ken? I don't suppose you've worked out a motive for it too?"

"Not yet," Ken admitted.

"When you find it, let me know," Bert told him. "It ought to be good."

"When you find what?" Mort Conner stood in the doorway with Ralph just behind him.

Bert motioned them in and pulled two more chairs close to Pop's desk.

"A motive for ruining your business with the sole purpose of

forcing you to sell it cheaply,” Bert told them. “Ken and my kid brother here seem to think that sounds perfectly reasonable-now that they’ve given up the idea of an enraged ex-employee out for revenge.”

“That’s not fair, Bert!” Sandy flared. “We don’t think it sounds reasonable-but then neither is it reasonable that Ralph wouldn’t have seen the glow of that oncoming car! All Ken’s ever said was that the whole series of accidents might have been caused deliberately. And you’ve got to admit that what we found out tonight certainly looks suspiciously like proof of that! At any rate, it-“

“Hey, take it easy!” Ralph Conner smiled at Sandy and Ken, and then at Bert, but his eyes were sharply curious. “Just what did you two find out tonight, anyway? And what was that about my not seeing something?”

“We did an experiment-up on Sugarloaf Hill.” Sandy still sounded on the defensive. “Go ahead, Ken. Tell them about it.”

Ken grinned a little apologetically at the two Conners. “I’ll make it as quick as I can,” he said. “So if you think I’m off my rocker you can say so right away.”

Briefly he related again what had happened on the hill earlier that evening.

“Looks like you’ve proved me a liar, all right,” Ralph said when Ken had finished. He got to his feet so abruptly that his chair rocked back on its rear legs. “I guess you’ll all feel better if I leave.”

“Sit down!” Pop’s voice lashed at him. “Ralph Conner, I whaled the tar out of you when you were little-and I can still do it. I will too, if you don’t show some sense.” He waited until Ralph, flushed and silent, settled down again. “Now!” Pop said. “Nobody’s calling anybody a liar. We’d just like to get to the bottom of this mess, and we can’t do it without your help.”

“Sorry,” Ralph mumbled. “But it certainly looks to me as if this experiment of Sandy and Ken proves I must have been lying.”

“It’s just the other way around,” Ken said. “The only reason we think the whole business looks fishy is because we assume you’re telling the truth.”

“I got lost somewhere, Ken,” Mort said. “I don’t follow you.”

“It’s this way.” Ken spoke slowly now. “We believe Ralph didn’t see the glow of an oncoming car, but that he did suddenly see its headlights right in front of him. And there are only two ways that could have happened. Either a car was coming up the hill toward Ralph without its lights on-or just with its parking lights-and then suddenly turned its brights on as it topped the crest. Or else there was a car waiting there on the crest, without its lights on, until Ralph got close-with the deliberate purpose of forcing Ralph off the road and adding one more to your chain of recent ‘accidents.’”

“No wonder you can’t follow a wild plot like that, Mort!” Bert said. “The whole thing’s crazy.”

Mort shook his head wearily. “I don’t know. I’d be glad of any explanation-even a crazy one-that proved Ralph and I haven’t been careless or just plain stupid.” He turned to Ken and Sandy. “But our business was never so valuable that anyone would go to all that trouble to get it. And if somebody really did want it so badly, why wouldn’t he have just offered to buy it?”

“But somebody did-six months ago,” Sandy pointed out.

“Sure,” Mort agreed. “A man who apparently had a momentary yen for a trucking business. Naturally I asked the broker about him this afternoon, but he says the man withdrew his offer after we refused to sell, and the broker hasn’t seen him since.”

“Who is buying the business then, Mort?” Pop asked.

“A man named Randolph Dutton,” Mort told him. “Seems Dutton has been looking around for a small inexpensive trucking business for several months, but Withers-that’s the broker-took for granted he couldn’t meet our price.” Mort grinned faintly. “But he called Dutton right away when I told him we’d be interested in any reasonable offer.”

“It wasn’t very reasonable at that,” Ralph put in bitterly. “It was just about one third of what that fellow offered to pay us six months ago. But naturally we had to grab it.”

“I can see you did,” Bert said. “But what a tough break!”

“It’s even worse than it sounds,” Mort added. “Dutton has to buy on a long-term installment plan. He can pay only a small amount in cash-not enough to let us meet our current bills. So we won’t have anything to go on with until we get jobs.” His lopsided smile flashed briefly. “I’m not trying to cry on your shoulders. I’m just explaining why it doesn’t seem likely to me that someone has been trying to force us to sell so that he could leap in and buy us out. Dutton’s just not the type.”

“Certainly doesn’t sound like it,” Bert agreed. He looked at Ken and Sandy. “You two satisfied now?”

Ralph put a hand on Bert’s arm. “Don’t jump on them. The boys have had more ideas about this than any of the rest of us have-even if we can’t go along with them. And we really appreciate what you’ve been trying to do,” he added to Ken and Sandy. “Sorry I got huffy. I realize now you don’t think I was lying. And I know it’s not your fault if none of us can supply you with any facts to back up your theories.”

He got to his feet and Mort stood up too. “There’s probably some simple explanation of why Ralph didn’t see the glow of those oncoming headlights,” Mort said, “and maybe someday we’ll find out what it is. But I don’t suppose it’ll do us much good to worry about it

any longer. We have to get along now. Dutton and the broker are coming tomorrow, and if everything looks all right to them, we'll draw up the papers right away and get it over with." He sighed. "The way I feel about the business now, I can't sell it fast enough and get started for South America."

Pop flashed him a worried glance. "You're set on going down there?"

"Sure," Mort said firmly. "It's the only sensible thing to do. Coming, Ralph?"

When Ken and the Allens closed up the office shortly afterward, and went home themselves, they found Mom waiting impatiently for their news. They gave it to her in the kitchen, over pie and milk.

"So it looks as if we've come to a dead end, Mom," Pop concluded.

"I don't know why you should say that," Mom retorted. "Seems to me Ken and Sandy have practically proved that somebody was waiting there at the top of the hill to wreck Ralph. Now all that's left to do is to find out who it was."

"That's all, Mom," Bert said gravely. "And with a little help from Chief Kane, and the co-operation of the entire staff of the F.B.I., the thing might be accomplished in a hundred years or so. Provided the boys are right in their assumption, of course."

"Now you listen to me, Bert Allen," Mom said. "If you can't help, then don't hinder. Do you hear me?"

Bert didn't answer immediately. "I guess you're right, Mom," he said finally. "I haven't had any helpful ideas of my own, so I guess I shouldn't be so energetic about knocking everybody else's."

He glanced at Ken and Sandy. They grinned at him and he grinned back. Then he looked sober again.

"It's just that the thing seems so hopeless and so unfair!" Bert said. "I feel as if the whole world had ganged up on the Conners-as if there were nothing we or anybody else could do to rescue them."

"That's no way to talk," Mom told him stanchly.

"The whole world isn't against them when the Allens are their friends," Ken said quietly. "I can testify to that."

The rest of the Allen family was as uncomfortable in the presence of gratitude as Sandy always was.

Mom, suddenly pink-cheeked, began to talk again as if she hadn't heard Ken's remark. "I'll tell you one thing," she said. "You can stop looking for someone bearing a grudge against those Conner boys. There's mighty little chance of finding anyone like that. Concentrate on what it is that the Conners have that someone might want very badly. When you find that, you'll be on the right track."

She sounded so sure of herself that the others all smiled at each other over Mom's head.

"Maybe there's a deposit of gold under the garage floor," Sandy suggested with mock seriousness.

It was the first time they had all laughed that day.

Mom sniffed. "If that's the best you can do, you'd better go to bed. You'd better go anyway. One of you might wake up with a good idea in the morning, and you'd want to be ready to start right to work on it."

"Aye, aye, sir." Sandy began to carry glasses and plates to the sink and the others jumped up to help him.

But when the light went out on the table between Ken's bed and Sandy's, a little while later, Sandy no longer sounded cheerful.

"Mom makes it sound so easy," he muttered. "All we have to do is find out why the trucking company might be twenty times more valuable than it really is-except that right now it's worth practically nothing."

Ken suddenly sat up in bed, propping himself against the backboard. "Aside from doubting that anyone would go to such lengths to get hold of a business," he said, "there's another objection to the theory about destroying the business so the Connors would sell out."

"There are a dozen," Sandy said.

"There's one in particular," Ken corrected. "That nobody would risk his own neck by trying to force a big truck off the road."

"Well," Sandy admitted, "I'd never take a chance like that. Would you?"

"No," Ken agreed. "I wouldn't. So keep that in mind for a minute, and think about something else. Ralph hasn't said one thing that proves he saw a car up there on the hill."

"What!" Sandy jerked upright. "But you said you believed him! Are you trying to tell me now you-"

"He saw a pair of headlights," Ken interrupted calmly.

Sandy let himself fall back on the bed. "I see," he said sarcastically. "And you think it would be possible to have a pair of headlights without-" He stopped suddenly.

His voice was awestruck when he repeated the words. "A pair of headlights-without a car! That's it! That would explain everything!" Sandy was sitting on the edge of the bed now, feeling for his slippers. "They could be fastened to a rod-or some other kind of a gadget. They-"

Ken reached over and turned on the light to grin at him.

"O.K.," he said. "So long as you think it's possible. So do I. Tomorrow we'll go looking for evidence. Tonight-as Mom says-we'd better get a good night's sleep."

He turned off the light again. "Good night."

Sandy's sigh was audible. But there was hope in his voice when he answered, "Good night, mastermind."

CHAPTER VI

EXPLODED THEORY

Although it was barely nine o'clock in the morning when Ken and Sandy parked the car at the top of Sugarloaf Hill, heat waves were already shimmering up from the road's surface.

Sandy said, "Well, we're parked right smack on the crest. It was right here-just on the other side of the road there-that the lights suddenly appeared."

Ken gestured toward the warning sign on the opposite shoulder. "The person who was operating the headlight gadget could have stood behind that sign."

"Right," Sandy agreed. "He stuck his gadget out into Ralph's lane, waited until Ralph got close enough, and then turned on the lights-fed from a dry-cell battery probably. Ralph would have seen just what he said he saw-lights suddenly appearing on the crest. If the headlights were mounted on a light rod it would have been easy to handle."

Ken nodded agreement. "Then as soon as Ralph crashes over the bank our Mr. X turns off his lights and. makes off for his own car."

"Which," Sandy concluded, "was parked on the other side of the crest, facing Brentwood. That explains why we never saw it at all."

Ken concentrated for a moment. "Remember Ralph said a car passed him just after he turned off the highway."

Sandy nodded.

"Well, let's say that was Mr. X's car, driven either by himself or by someone working with him. I guess it would have taken two men to pull this stunt. They could have been following Ralph for miles, to make sure he took this road home the way he usually did. Then as soon as Ralph turned off the new highway, Mr. X speeds up, passes Ralph, and reaches the top of the hill long before the truck does. This gives him plenty of time to get set with his gadget-and also assures him that the next car coming up the hill will be Ralph's truck."

Sandy wrinkled his brow. "I don't know that he could get here 'long before' the truck did. It's about three miles from the turnoff to the crest here. A car could reach it easily in four minutes, but it wouldn't take Ralph more than twice as long. So Mr. X couldn't have had more than four minutes to get organized."

"I don't think he'd have needed that much," Ken said firmly. "After all, what did he have to do? Just jump out of the car with his gadget and crouch down behind the sign. The car drives on over the crest-and takes its time about parking somewhere down there. Mr. X. could have figured everything beforehand to a fraction of an inch-just how

far to stick his gadget out, for example, so that when he turned the lights on they would seem to be right in the middle of Ralph's lane. I think you're wrong, Sandy. I think he could have been ready for Ralph within a matter of seconds."

"I guess you're right," Sandy agreed. "But here's something else. Wouldn't the headlights on the gadget have reflected Ralph's lights-before the gadget headlights were turned on, I mean? Wouldn't Ralph have seen *something*?"

"If the gadget was all painted black-" Ken began.

Sandy stopped him. "He couldn't have painted the glass over his headlights black."

"No. He couldn't have," Ken shook his head. "Well, that's a minor point right now. The important thing is that we can see how it was worked in general. If Ralph came straight on at the lights, Mr. X would have been able to jump down the gully to safety and hide in the bushes in case Ralph stopped to investigate. If Ralph crashed into the gully, Mr. X just walked down to his car-taking his gadget with him, of course-and drove away."

"While Ralph was roasting to death in the cab of his tractor! Anybody who could deliberately-!" Sandy stopped himself and returned to the business in hand. "Well, I guess it would work, all right. Now if we could just find some evidence that that's what happened!"

"Come on," Ken said. "Let's start looking for it around that sign over there."

The sign that bore the words:

WARNING

HILL TRUCKS

USE LOW GEAR

was a wooden rectangle about three feet wide and four feet high, raised above the ground a foot or so by sturdy wooden supports.

"He'd have been on this side," Ken said, "away from Ralph as the truck came up the hill."

Together they looked at the crushed stone that formed the road's narrow shoulder at that point.

"No footsteps would ever show up on that surface," Sandy said disgustedly.

"But look! Right there!" Ken pointed to a shallow depression. "Doesn't it look as if something heavy had been dragged across the stone there? See-the mark goes right on into the dirt beyond."

"I can certainly see it there all right!" Sandy said.

Together they bent over to stare at a rough scrape mark about a foot wide, extending from the crushed stone on across the narrow strip of earth on the gully's rim.

"It goes right on over the edge, down into the gully," Sandy said excitedly. Then he straightened with a sigh. "Except that when it hits the weeds and grass there, it doesn't show any more."

"Maybe we can find some traces of it down there," Ken said determinedly. "But before we try that-look at these scratches out in the road."

He stepped back onto the concrete and pointed out to Sandy the twin six-inch-long marks which had been visible to him as he bent low at the edge of the road.

"Hmm," Sandy said. "That's what they look like all right-scratches. Two of them, parallel-and heading right for that scrape mark in the dirt!"

"It doesn't exactly fit in with our theory of two lights on a rod," Ken admitted. "But it sure looks as if something that had been standing on the road had been dragged off and down into the gully."

"Maybe the rod was so heavy that Mr. X couldn't hold it out. It might have been mounted on some kind of support," Sandy suggested.

Ken brightened. "I bet it was. After all, the lights had to be steady-they couldn't waver around."

Despite the heat, they grinned at each other cheerfully.

"Come on," Ken said. "Let's see if we can turn up anything interesting down in the gully."

They followed the direction of the scrape mark at the road's edge, but kept to one side so as not to obliterate any evidence that might be there. The ground was rough and partially grown over with weeds and small bushes. It was almost impossible to guess whether anyone had descended the steep bank at that point recently or not.

But halfway down-some twenty feet below the surface of the road-Ken halted and looked back up the steep bank.

A moment later he gave a low whistle.

"What's up?" Sandy demanded.

"Stand right where I'm standing," Ken told him, "and look back up the bank."

Sandy obeyed. And then he whistled too.

There was a row of gouges in the bank-little depressions, each of which looked too much like a roughness in the surface to be noticeable by itself. But from the angle that the boys were looking, they were strikingly apparent.

"Someone came down here in a rush," Ken murmured. "The earth crumbled a little everywhere he hit it, and almost covered up his tracks. But those marks show where he dug his heels trying to check his speed."

Sandy grabbed him excitedly and started on down the hill. "Let's see how far they-" He stopped. "Maybe the insurance adjuster made

these marks-or Andy Kane."

"Maybe," Ken admitted. "But I certainly don't think so. They were looking for evidence of a car-or for evidence that there was no car. I don't think it occurred to them to look for evidence of somebody on foot down here."

"Let's hope you're right. Come on."

They found that the row of gouges went all the way to the bottom of the gully, where it disappeared in the tangled mat of rustling weeds and bushes that filled the gully floor.

"Not much chance of finding anything around here," Sandy said. "Our Mr. X could have-Hey, what's this?" He bent toward a low prickly bush and as Ken came alongside he pulled a bit of black cloth from one of the twigs.

Ken snapped his fingers. "Why couldn't the headlights on Mr. X's rod have been covered with a couple of yards of that stuff? It could have been yanked off easily enough when he was ready to turn his lights on-and in the meantime it would prevent the gadget from picking up Ralph's lights."

Sandy nodded. "Perfect." He found an old envelope in one of his pockets and tucked the piece of cloth safely away in it.

They explored a little further, but made no more finds.

"Well," Ken said, "at least we know somebody came down this bank in a hurry."

"Of course," Sandy pointed out, "we can't be sure these marks were made on the night of Ralph's accident. For all we know that piece of cloth has been here a long time too."

"Those marks would have been washed away in a rain," Ken said. "And that cloth doesn't look as if it's been rained on either. The last time it rained was Thursday, so I think we can assume our marks were made some time between now and then."

"So do I," Sandy said. "But I wish we could prove it instead of assuming it. And I also wish we could prove these marks and the ones at the edge of the road had anything to do with Ralph's accident. It looks as if somebody dragged something off the road and then came plunging down here-but that doesn't quite fit in with your theory."

Ken, still poking around in the weeds, looked up sharply. "Why not?"

"Well," Sandy said, "you said that if Mr. X's trick worked and Ralph wrecked his track-which he certainly did-then Mr. X merely stepped out from behind the sign and walked off down the road to his car."

"So?" Ken prompted, shaking the drops of perspiration off his forehead.

"So why did Mr. X come tearing down here? He didn't have to

hide. Ralph wasn't going to chase him."

"Sometimes," Ken muttered, "you're as bad as Bert."

Sandy grinned. "I'm just asking the same question he and Pop would ask, though of course I ask it in a much-" He broke off, his eyes fixed on a patch of bright green vegetation near Ken's feet. "Were you poking around in that stuff?" he demanded.

Ken glanced down. "Sure. Did I miss something? What-?"

"Brother, you *didn't* miss something!" Sandy groaned. "Don't you know poison ivy when you see it?"

Ken looked relieved. "Oh, sure. I'm one of those lucky people who are immune to it. Stop worrying-unless you were around here too?"

"It's all right. I don't get it either. But let's not crowd our luck," Sandy added. "Wet and sticky the way we are now, we might not be immune after all. Let's go."

"All right," Ken agreed, and they started the awkward climb back up the bank. "I don't think there's anything more to look for here."

Ken slid under the wheel. The leather seat was as hot as a griddle and they both gasped as they sat down. Even when Ken had the car in motion, the hot breeze did little to ease their discomfort.

"Let's go out to the lake and take a swim," Sandy muttered, as Ken laboriously backed and backed again in order to turn the car in the narrow road.

Ken shook his head. "If we're ever going to find out anything about Ralph's accident, let's do it as fast as we can. Before Mort signs that South American contract."

"You're right." Sandy sighed. "Well, what next?"

Ken paused at the stop light at the foot of the hill. When he started up again, he said, "How about trying to find out something about this man who just bought the business? What was his name-Dutton?" Sandy nodded. "If we could find some link between him and the man who first tried to buy it--"

"Or," Sandy picked it up, "if we could find any reason at all why either Dutton or the first man might want a business bad enough to try to get it this way, then we'd really be on the track of something."

They were almost at the office when Sandy, sunk in thought, suddenly sat upright. "There's Ralph at the next corner. Pull over, Ken. I want to ask him something."

"Sure." Ken edged toward the curb near the corner and tapped the horn. "But let's not tell him what we've been doing-yet."

Sandy nodded, already waving at Ralph.

"Hi." Ralph came up to the car and leaned on the window sill. "More questions?" But his smile indicated that his anger of the night before was gone for good.

Sandy smiled back at him. "Sure-you know us. But just one-and

only if you won't boil over at it. We really--

"I know," Ralph cut in. "You really believe every word I say."

"That's right," Ken said. "We do."

"These headlights you saw"-Sandy began-"could you tell anything at all about the car behind them?"

"Look, sleuths," Ralph said patiently, "you drive-both of you. If you were to come up to the top of a hill and suddenly see headlights coming right at you, would you take the time to try to find out what kind of car they were attached to? Or would you concentrate on trying to avoid a collision?"

"Meaning," Sandy said, "that you never really saw the car itself?"

"You could certainly put it that way," Ralph agreed. "They could have been the lights on a witch's broomstick, for all I could tell."

The boys exchanged a quick glance.

Ralph caught it and laughed. "Don't worry," he said. "I'm not really losing my grip. I don't believe in witches' broomsticks, with or without headlights. I know there was a car behind those lights even though I couldn't see it."

Another quick glance flashed between the two boys. Sandy nodded in answer to Ken's unspoken question.

"I know nobody agrees with us," Ken said slowly, "but would you assume just for a minute, Ralph, that somebody wanted to drive you off the road? And would you tell us whether the lights you saw could have been attached-not to a car at all-but to a rod held by a man hiding behind that warning sign there? He'd have been in no danger himself, but he could have driven you into the gully just as surely as if he'd been there with a car."

Ralph took out a cigarette and lit it before he answered. "Not a chance," he said finally. "I'm absolutely certain of that. I agree it's a smart theory, but I know it didn't happen like that. You see, those lights weren't standing still. They were moving toward me. They were traveling at least as fast as I was going myself."

His jaw tightened briefly, as if he were reliving that moment. "No, sir," he repeated. "Not a chance. Those lights weren't sitting there on a stick. They were coming right at me, getting bigger and bigger every second!"

CHAPTER VII

GRANGER ISSUES A WARNING

The boys watched Ralph walk away. His last words seemed to hang heavily in the air behind him.

"There goes one fine theory," Sandy said glumly.

"I suppose we have to take his word for it," Ken said reluctantly. "If he says the lights were moving, they must have been moving."

"Sure," Sandy agreed. "Any man who's driven as many miles as Ralph has couldn't be wrong about a thing like that. I suppose, if we had any brains, we'd have asked him that question earlier."

"I suppose so." Ken jerked the wheel around to continue toward the *Advance* office. "But I still think some kind of trick was worked," he said stubbornly.

"Maybe so," Sandy agreed. "But we're as far from knowing what it was as we were yesterday." He grinned briefly. "Anyway, I'm glad we didn't tell Pop and Bert about our theory before Ralph put the damper on it. You can imagine what they'd have said!"

Ken parked the car behind the office and they walked in through the shop, entering the office through the rear door.

There was a stranger seated in the visitor's chair beside Pop's desk, and as Pop saw the boys, he said to his guest, "Now you can meet the rest of our staff."

He motioned to Ken and Sandy, and when they approached, he said, "This is Sandy, my younger son, and this is Ken Holt. Boys, this is Mr. Randolph Dutton, new owner of the Conner Trucking Company. I'm sure we all want to do everything we can to help him succeed."

As he spoke the last words he flashed the boys a warning glance—a glance that ordered them to be on their good behavior.

"I'm glad to know you both." Dutton picked his short plump figure off the chair and extended his hand to each of them in turn. "I always say it's a smart move to get to know the Press right away." His round face broadened in a grin.

"Mort Conner brought Mr. Dutton over because he wants to run an ad announcing the new ownership," Pop said, and again he seemed to be warning the boys to be courteous to Dutton for Ralph's sake.

"It's certainly too bad about that lad and his brother," Dutton said with a sigh. "They're fine young men and it's easy to see how hard they worked to build up their business. Of course I'm grateful for the opportunity to buy it at a price I can afford, but I can't help but feel I'm taking advantage of them."

"No reason for you to feel that way," Pop said. "Things being what

they are the Conners were lucky to find a purchaser so quickly.”

“I was wondering about that.” Ken’s voice was innocent but he was careful to keep his eyes turned away from Pop. “How did you and the Conners get together so fast?”

“Just one of those things,” Dutton said cheerfully. “I used to be a trucker myself, up to two years ago. My two sons and I had worked up a nice little business. But my doctor told me to stop.” He tapped his chest. “Heart, you know.”

Sandy’s voice too was innocent. “You must have made a rapid recovery, to be going into business again.”

Pop sent him an annoyed glance, but Sandy pretended not to be aware of it.

“Oh, yes.” Dutton nodded. “Two solid years of rest have done me a world of good.”

“Where was your former business?” Ken asked. “Or should I say where is it? Are your sons still carrying it on?”

“No, they’re not,” Dutton answered. “We were located out in a little town called Wide Vista, in the center of the California fruit country. Great little town-great country. But when I had to retire, my sons decided they didn’t want to run the business without me. I sold out and we’ve been traveling around the country since-doctor’s orders, as far as I was concerned. But when they were ready to settle down again, I felt so much better I decided I’d go back to work too. I don’t like idleness-makes me fret.” He grinned. “I convinced the doctor that a little light work wouldn’t hurt me-would be better for me, in fact, than sitting around worrying. So we began to look for another trucking business.”

“And you found this one?” Ken prompted.

“Not right away.” Dutton shrugged modestly. “We couldn’t afford to pay much, so our field was pretty narrow. I guess we saw a dozen brokers before we ran across Dan Withers. Must have been fate, the day we saw him. Less than a week later-yesterday afternoon, that was-he phoned about the Conner Trucking Company. It was just what we wanted, and at a price we could afford. But, as I say, I can’t help feeling badly about the Conners.”

“How long did you say you’d been looking?” Ken asked.

“Couple of months, it was.” Dutton shook his head profoundly. “Must have been fate, as I say, It might have taken us years to find something that fit our specifications and our pocket.”

Ken opened his mouth for still another question, but Pop cut in swiftly.

“The *Advance* would like to know something about your plans,” he said. “Do you intend to expand the present business?”

While Dutton cocked his head to one side, considering his answer,

Pop sent Ken and Sandy both a look that unmistakably ordered them to stop questioning Dutton about his past.

"As to expanding," Dutton said slowly, "we-my sons and I-must proceed slowly. We have only limited funds at our disposal. We're not able to buy a lot of new trucks and new equipment right away. But at the same time we realize we've got to scrimp together enough to do a complete overhauling job of the three trucks we'll have."

Dutton fingered a jacket Dutton as if in embarrassment. "This is no criticism of the Conners, you understand," he said. "But we realize we'll have to take extra care to avoid mechanical breakdowns. It may be difficult to convince insurance companies, under the-er- present conditions, that we're a good risk. I hope some good new shop equipment will help do that. We don't intend to start operations until we have an inspection pit in the garage. Then every truck will be run over the pit and given a complete checkup each time it returns to the garage."

"The Conners have a greasing ramp," Sandy pointed out. "Right outside the garage there, near the--"

"Yes, I know," Dutton interrupted with an apologetic gesture. "But my experience has been that in unpleasant weather a mechanic is tempted to hurry through an outdoors inspection in order to get back inside the garage." He smiled. "We won't dare to risk hurried inspections. So I intend to make it pleasant enough for our mechanic to spend all the time necessary to check every part of every truck or tractor we use."

"Sounds like good business to me," Pop said, making a note on the scrap of paper under his hand. "How long will it be then before you're actually in operation?"

"I can't be sure," Dutton told him. "We can't afford to delay any longer than necessary, of course. Mr. Conner-Mort Conner-has kindly offered to introduce me to Fred Ayres, a contractor he says he can recommend highly. And I'm hoping Mr. Ayres can start work immediately on our pit." He glanced up at a wall calendar above Pop's head. "I should think ten days would finish it."

Pop made another note. "About July seventh, then."

"I can't be too definite about the date, Mr. Allen,"

Dutton said. "Ayres may not be able to begin right away -there may be delays."

Pop nodded. "I understand. That's just the time you'll be aiming at." He straightened in his chair. "Now about this ad you want to run. What do you want it to say?"

"That's a ticklish point." Dutton looked uncomfortable. "If I feel guilty about acquiring the Conner business, I expect there will be many local people who feel even more strongly about it. I don't want

to-" he hesitated, "to rub in the fact that the Conners had to sell out. Couldn't I just run a small announcement that Randolph Dutton has purchased the garage and equipment of the Conner Trucking Company-and let it go at that?"

Pop nodded approval. "I think that would be very wise."

"And for the same reason," Dutton continued, "I'd appreciate it if any news story you plan to run about the purchase would also be simple and as brief as possible."

Pop nodded again, and Dutton stood up.

"Well," the little man said, "I'd better get back to the garage. I'm mighty glad to have met you all. And I appreciate your courtesy," he added to Pop.

When he had left the office, Pop turned on the boys.

"Sometimes I wonder where you've been brought up," he said. "You two can ask more questions than any other dozen people in Brentwood."

"We didn't ask anything out of the way," Sandy said defensively. "Why were you so extra polite to him, anyway?"

"For a very good reason-quite apart from the fact that I've got nothing against the man and therefore saw no reason *not* to be polite to him," Pop said. "There's a clause in his contract with the Conners that enables him to back out of the deal within three months if he finds he's being subjected to a campaign of local ill feeling."

The boys stared at him.

"I never heard of a contract with that kind of clause in it!" Sandy exploded.

"There must be quite a few things you've never heard of," Pop told him calmly. "But whether you've heard of it or not, the clause is there. Dutton is a smart man. He realizes-you could see that for yourselves-that Brentwood people might think he'd taken advantage of the Conners. The clause is supposed to ensure that the Conners themselves will do all they can to help him fight anything like that. They've agreed to the clause, and as friends of theirs, the least we can do is show Dutton every courtesy. We'd be doing the Conners no good if they found themselves with a useless company dumped back on their hands, because we had made it difficult for Dutton here."

Pop got to his feet. "And so I hope the next time you encounter Dutton, *you'll* be extra polite to him too," he concluded. "You coming home to lunch?"

"Er-you go ahead," Sandy muttered. "We'll be along pretty soon."

Pop departed without another word and the boys looked at each other.

"I don't think we're very popular with him right now," Sandy said.

"I don't think so either," Ken agreed. "And I was planning to ask

him what he thought of getting in touch with the police of that California town Dutton says he comes from-

"Wide Vista," Sandy supplied.

"That was it. I thought we might check up and find out if Dutton's really what he claims to be."

"I know what he'd have said." Sandy thrust out his chin in imitation of Pop Allen at his most skeptical. "Do you think any self-respecting police force would snoop into a man's record on the unsupported say-so of a couple of amateur detectives?"

Ken grinned bleakly in tribute to the imitation. "I guess there's nothing we can do about it now."

"Nothing you can do about what?" Bert, entering the rear door in time to hear Ken's last words, dropped limply into his chair. With one hand he mopped his damp forehead and with the other he began to loosen his tie.

Sandy told him about Dutton's visit to the office and Pop's surprising statement afterward.

"Hmm." Bert frowned. "In that case," he said, "I certainly hope Dutton doesn't get wind of the snooping I've been doing."

"You-snooping!" Ken exclaimed. "What for?"

"You two can be more persuasive than you think," Bert said with a wry grin. "The more I thought about what you'd said, the more I began to wonder if there wasn't some connection between Dutton and the man who offered to buy the Conner business six months ago."

"Is there?" Sandy demanded excitedly, and both boys seemed to hold their breaths as they waited for Bert's reply.

Bert shook his head. "Not according to Withers, the broker. The first man was a James Tolliver-a New York wholesale fruit and vegetable dealer. Withers admits he doesn't know anything about him, except that the man said he was thinking of buying his own trucking outfit, and that the Conners business was just what he needed."

"That doesn't prove there isn't any connection between him and Dutton," Ken pointed out.

"Withers says," Bert went on, "that when the Conners turned down Tolliver's offer, he-Withers-suggested looking around for something else, and Tolliver said no. So when Mort put the business up for sale yesterday, Withers says his first thought was to get in touch with Tolliver. But he found Tolliver had sold his vegetable business-he couldn't even locate him, as a matter of fact. So Withers took the next best thing-the Dutton offer. And as far as he knows, Tolliver and Dutton never even met."

"So it does look as if Tolliver was out of the running," Sandy said slowly.

"It does to me," Bert agreed. "And yet-"

"And yet what?" Ken asked.

"And yet I am finally sold on the idea that *someone* was behind that series of accidents." Bert got up, pretending not to notice the amazement on both their faces. "See you later," he said. "I'm covering that businessmen's lunch this noon." At the door he turned to salute them. "Keep at it, sleuths. I'll be with you in spirit while I suffer through the chicken patty and the speeches."

"Well!" Sandy breathed. "What do you know about that?" He turned toward Ken. "What are you doing?"

Ken had grabbed a New York phone book and was leafing rapidly through it. "Looking up James Tolliver,"

Ken told him. "You try him in the classified directory-under wholesale fruits and vegetables."

A few minutes later they were shaking their heads at each other. Tolliver's name appeared in neither book.

"Wait!" Ken said. "He's not in business any more-he may even have left New York. Haven't we got an old book?"

In the dust of a bottom shelf, they unearthed a year-old New York telephone book, and tried that. But again they found no listing for a James Tolliver, either business or residential.

"That's funny," Sandy muttered. "How could he run a business without a phone? Unless," he added suddenly, "his company had another name-you know, something like Empire State Fruits. But how could we ever check that?"

"I've got another idea." Ken reached for the phone. "Get on an extension and listen."

A few seconds later the hoarse voice of Steve Granger, New York chief of Global News, was barking into their ears.

"Ken?" Granger asked. "What's loose down your way?"

"We need a little information," Ken said. "About a man named Dan Withers-a New York broker who deals in business properties."

"Withers, Dan." They could visualize Granger's pencil scribbling over a sheet of paper. "O.K. That all?"

"No. And a Randolph Dutton from Wide Vista, California."

"What? Have a heart!" Granger said. "Global doesn't have a man in Wide Vista-whatever that is. What do you expect me to do-run out there myself? What are you two kids up to, anyway?"

Ken ignored the question. "We just wondered," he said, "if you could find out for us whether there was any connection between either of those two men and a third one-a New York fruit and vegetable wholesale dealer, now apparently out of business. His name's James Tolliver."

"What was that name again?"

"James Tolliver," Ken repeated.

There was a dead silence for several seconds.

"That's what I thought you said," Granger said finally. His voice was strangely quiet. "Now I want you to listen to me, Ken. I always feel responsible for you when your father's out on an assignment. Tell me exactly why you want to know about Tolliver."

The boys looked at each other across the room, startled by the sudden change in Granger's manner.

Ken raised his eyebrows questioningly. Sandy nodded.

"Well, it's kind of a mixed-up mess," Ken began, "and we're not sure Tolliver is tied up in it, anyway. But here goes."

For some minutes Ken spoke. Granger let him finish without interruption.

"I don't get it," he said, when Ken had concluded. "And I'm not going to try to. But I'll tell you what Tolliver is-or is supposed to be. He's the dim, shadowy figure behind half the rackets in New York-maybe the whole eastern seaboard. Nothing's ever been pinned on him-he's been too smart for that. In fact, few people have ever heard his name."

"But what would a man like that want with a small trucking business in Brentwood?" Ken asked wonderingly.

"Who knows?" Granger answered. "It was rumored a while back that he was starting some racket down at the docks. Maybe he plans to branch out into trucking too -or more probably into highjacking."

Sandy cut in for the first time. "Could he want to use the garage for a gambling casino-or something like that?"

"I wouldn't try to guess," Granger said dryly. "But this I know: he's bad medicine. Stay away from him-far away!"

"He probably isn't involved in this thing, anyway," Ken said.

"I hope not. I'll look into these names for you," Granger went on. "And if there proves to be any connection-any slightest connection-between Tolliver and this business of yours, you go straight to the police." Granger laughed shortly. "Or it might be better if you went to China!"

CHAPTER VIII

DUTTON DOESN'T REACT

"Whew!" Bert whistled softly. "We start out with what looks like a perfectly simple accident-and we wind up with one of the kingpins of the underworld!"

Several hours had gone by since Granger had startled the boys with his news. Ken and Sandy hadn't wanted to discuss it with Pop at lunch, in front of Mom, and after lunch Pop had worked at home for some time on an editorial. This was the first chance they had had to repeat Granger's information to both Bert and Pop.

Pop looked quizzically at Bert, though his eyes were sober. "Aren't you jumping to conclusions, son? Tolliver's only connection with the Conners, so far as we know, is that he once wanted to buy their business-an idea he apparently gave up some time ago."

"I know," Bert admitted. "But on the other hand, Tolliver sounds like one of the few people in the world ruthless enough to plan a series of fake accidents to force the Conners to the wall-and into selling out."

"But when he gets them to that point-if we assume for a minute that he did," Pop argued, "how do you explain the fact that he didn't buy the business after all?"

Ken sat forward. "We don't have to explain it," he pointed out, "if Dutton is a front man for Tolliver. And how do we know he isn't? It would be logical for Tolliver to let somebody else make the actual purchase-if he'd already shown interest in the place himself, just before the series of accidents began."

"Right," Sandy agreed. "I think we ought to work on Dutton-dig into his background. If we find a link between the two, then we'll really have something."

Ken nodded. "Granger will do what checking he can," he told Pop and Bert, "but he won't be able to do a complete job. I think we ought to ask Andy Kane to send an official query to the Wide Vista police."

Pop shook his head. "In the first place, Andy wouldn't act unless we have some evidence-which we haven't. But supposing he did send through a query, and the Wide Vista police gave Dutton a clean bill of health, and then suppose Dutton got wind of what had happened. Wouldn't he have the right to hit the roof? And wouldn't he be likely to call the deal off immediately, under the terms of his contract?"

Bert stabbed a pencil disgustedly into his desk. "You're right, of course. We want to help Mort and Ralph-not ruin their sale for them." He flung the pencil down. "But how can we just sit back and forget

the whole thing?" he demanded.

"We don't have to forget it," Pop assured him calmly. "But neither do we have to go off the deep end until we have more than a dim suspicion to push us. Let's wait until we hear from Granger. If he turns up some link between Dutton and Tolliver, then I think Andy would be justified in getting into this deal."

"And if he doesn't?" Sandy prodded. "Remember, Granger doesn't have the facilities to—"

"If he doesn't," Pop broke in, "we can worry about what to do next when the time comes. In the meantime, I'd like to suggest that we get a little work done. This is June twenty-ninth—the Fourth of July is next Monday. And we've still got a lot to do if we expect to run anything in the *Advance* except the Declaration of Independence. Bert, didn't the mayor say he'd have the municipal program all figured out by this afternoon?"

"That's what he said. O.K., I'll go after it." Bert heaved himself out of his chair, grabbed some paper, and left.

"Sandy," Pop continued, "you go talk to the chairman of the parade and see what floats have been lined up. Ken, you go see Callender, who's in charge of the fireworks display out at the lake that night."

They were both at the door when Pop called Ken back. "You'll pass the Conner garage on the way back. Here's a proof of Dutton's ad. Ask him to O.K. it."

"Aye, aye, sir," Ken said.

"And *don't* ask him five thousand other questions," Pop warned.

Ken had finished his first assignment and was on his way to the garage when he saw Sandy, just emerging from the bank where he had interviewed the chief teller, who was also the float chairman.

"I'll come along with you to see Dutton," Sandy said, steering Ken into the passageway that ran alongside the bank building. "And then let's stop in for a soda."

Ken raised his eyebrows. "No questions at Dutton's, you understand."

Sandy grinned. "I understand."

They cut across the alley and entered the garage from the rear. Dutton was there, talking to Fred Ayres.

"I want the pit to start here," he said, putting a mark on the cement floor, "and run back to within a couple of feet of the back wall."

Ayres nodded. "How wide and how deep?"

"Narrow enough for the trucks to straddle it," Dutton answered, "and I'd say about five feet deep—so a mechanic can stand under there and work in comfort."

He looked up and caught sight of the boys and waved them hospitably in, as he added to Ayres, "How long will the job take?"

Ayres considered. "As long as you're in a hurry," he said, "we can start tomorrow on ripping the floor out and making the excavation. Friday we'll build the forms. But we don't work Saturday-and Monday is a holiday. So we won't pour the cement until Tuesday."

"That'll be fine." Dutton smiled. "I'd resigned myself to waiting until Tuesday at the earliest for you to begin"

"O.K. We'll be here tomorrow morning." Ayres started for the door.

"I'll have the space cleared for you," Dutton promised. Now," he said to the boys, "what can I do for you?"

Ken held forward the proof. "Mr. Allen wants to know if this looks all right. It's your ad, Mr. Dutton."

"Oh." Dutton scanned the sheet and smiled. "It looks just fine." He scrawled his initials in the margin.

As he handed the sheet back a gray coupe pulled into the garage and stopped within a few feet of where they stood. The young man who was driving it-a husky bull-necked six-footer-said, "Hi, Pop," and climbed out from under the wheel. The cut of his blue suit exaggerated the breadth of his wide shoulders.

Dutton smiled. "This is my son Jack," he said to Ken and Sandy. "Jack, meet Sandy Allen and Ken Holt of the Brentwood *Advance*."

Young Dutton shook hands with a powerful grip. "Howdy," he said, and his face creased into a grin that seemed lopsided because his battered-looking nose twisted to one side.

Even Sandy winced slightly and flexed fingers that felt as if they had been caught in a vise. "I'm glad I never played against you on a football field." He grinned.

"My nose scare you?" Dutton grinned back. "Well, I sure never got that on--"

"Jack was a great halfback," his father cut in proudly. "One of the best Wide Vista ever had." He looked up at his tall son. "Remember that game with Sacramento?"

"Oh, sure, Pop." Dutton fished in his pocket for a cigarette. "That was some game."

"Who won?" Ken wanted to know.

"Who won? Why, naturally-" Jack Dutton began.

"Sacramento-naturally," Dutton interrupted again. "Much bigger place, of course-much finer team on the whole. Even so the score was seven to six. If Wide Vista had just been able to convert the touchdown Jack made after an eighty-yard run-" He shook his head. "That was a heartbreaker." He lit a match for Jack's cigarette. "You'd better get at that job, Jack," he added.

"What-? Oh, sure." Jack Dutton took both the boys' hands again in

another painful grip before he turned to walk through the front door.

Dutton watched him go, "Great halfback," he murmured. "And now," he said to the boys, "I'm afraid I've got jobs to do too, if there's nothing more--"

"That was all," Ken told him. "We just wanted the ad checked. And we'd better get going ourselves, Sandy," he added, "if we want to get that Tolliver story today."

He winked at Sandy as he said it, but even so Sandy couldn't quite control his start of surprise.

Dutton himself remained entirely unmoved at the sound of the name. So far as Ken could tell, it had no significance for him at all.

"Come on, Sandy," Ken said, stifling his sense of disappointment. "Thanks, Mr. Dutton. And good luck with your new pit."

They walked on through the garage, with Dutton politely accompanying them, and found themselves side-stepping at the front doorway to avoid a young man swinging in from the street.

He was nearly as tall as Jack Dutton but narrow-shouldered and bony. His curiously puffed and swollen face made his head seem far too large for his body.

"Bob!" Dutton said. "I thought you were going to stay in the hotel room until the swelling went down."

"It itches," the young man answered shortly. "I nearly went crazy sitting around there."

Dutton smiled and shook his head at him. "This is my other son, Bob," he told the boys, and once more introduced Ken and Sandy.

Bob Dutton nodded without shaking hands, and they saw that his hands too were swollen. Like his face they had been treated with a pinkish salve.

"He doesn't usually look quite so strange," Dutton said. "But he picked up some poison ivy somewhere and it's poisoned his whole system."

"It can be mighty uncomfortable," Ken said sympathetically.

"I keep telling him," Dutton said, "that fishing can be a dangerous sport, but he's so enthusiastic about it, he doesn't even stop to look where he's going once he gets in the neighborhood of a trout stream."

He looked to his son for corroboration of the remark, but Bob Dutton had wandered on inside the garage.

"I guess he doesn't feel very sociable these days," Dutton murmured.

"I don't blame him," Ken said. "I wouldn't either-with a bad attack like that. Well, thanks again, Mr. Dutton."

The new owner of the trucking company waved genially after them as they went off.

Sandy waited until they were out of earshot. "What was the idea of

bringing the name of Tolliver into the conversation? At least you could have given me enough warning so I didn't nearly jump out of my skin."

"I just wanted to get Dutton's reaction," Ken said.

"Well, you got it. It didn't seem to mean a thing to him."

"I'm not worrying," Ken assured him. "We got something out of that visit, even if it doesn't tie Dutton in with Tolliver."

"We did?" Sandy stared at him. "I didn't-"

"Bon't you think there's a chance," Ken asked, "that Bob Dutton picked up that poison ivy while he was fooling around in the gully on Sugarloaf Hill?"

CHAPTER IX

KEN SEES THE LIGHT

Sandy stopped dead. "Jumping catfish! I bet you're right! He was there at the bottom of the gully, where we were-where the heel marks ended. Why, that practically proves that-!"

Sandy cut himself off and shook his head. "The heat must be getting me. How could we ever prove that's where he got the poison ivy?"

"We probably can't," Ken admitted. "But I still think it's one more link."

He urged Sandy forward again and a moment later they turned into the corner drugstore. When they were settled in a booth, with sodas in front of them, Ken went on, "Something else peculiar struck me back there in the garage. I got the impression that Jack Dutton heard about that famous football game for the first time this afternoon-at the same moment we did."

Sandy looked up swiftly from his drink. "I did too," he said. "I was going to mention it to you as soon as we got outside, but your remark about the Tolliver business sidetracked it."

Ken grinned. "Good. I thought maybe my imagination was working overtime again."

Sandy shook his head. "No. There were at least two suspicious-sounding remarks. First, when I said I wouldn't like to play football against him, he came back with some remark about his nose. I think what he was going to say was that he didn't break his nose playing football."

"But Dutton didn't let him finish the sentence," Ken pointed out.

"Right. And when you asked who won the game he said 'Why, naturally-' as if he meant 'Why, naturally we did.'"

"And again his father interrupted before he could finish the sentence," Ken said.

Sandy nodded. "I definitely got the impression that his father was afraid to let him talk-afraid that he might say the wrong thing."

"As if," Ken agreed, "they had cooked up the story beforehand, and then Jack Dutton forgot his lines."

"But what could it mean?" Sandy asked. "If Jack Dutton was never a football player-if he was a fighter instead, which is what he looks like-what would be the point of lying about it?"

Ken sucked up the last of his soda through a limp straw. "I don't know," he admitted. "But if a man wanted to bring a couple of tough customers into town with him, I suppose the simplest thing would be

to tell everybody they were his sons.”

“Then you think-?”

“I don’t think anything yet,” Ken interrupted. “But our visit to the garage certainly didn’t help to convince me that Dutton is the upright, sterling character he claims to be. Even if he didn’t turn pale when I mentioned Tolliver.” He slid out of the seat. “We’d better get back to the office before Pop sends out a warrant for us.”

Pop was working at full speed when they walked into the *Advance* office. Wednesday-the day before publication day-was always especially busy. He handed them both new assignments immediately.

“His Honor came through with the Fourth-of-July program all right,” he said. “The parade starts at city hall, goes the length of Main Street, and then reassembles an hour later at the lake community center for the judging of the floats. Bert’s doing the lead story on the whole thing. I want you, Ken, to do a special yarn about the various floats-who built them and all. Including,” he added, “what they’re supposed to represent.”

“Yes, sir,” Ken said.

“He’ll have to get in touch with all the organizations that are having floats,” Pop said to Sandy. “So he’ll need your help. Do what you can by phone.”

They stayed at their desks for some time, and then went out in the car to round up the float chairmen they hadn’t been able to reach by telephone. It was almost six o’clock when they headed back toward the office. Ken was driving. Sandy was studying his scribbled notes.

“One red and black,” he muttered. “One orange and blue.”

“What are you doing?” Ken asked. “Memorizing the colors of license plates?”

“I am trying,” Sandy replied with dignity, “to make sure I have all the colors right on these floats. You know the complaints we get if we say blue when they told us pink. And for a man like myself, who is essentially a photographer, these details-“

Ken waved a hand at him. “Keep quiet a minute. I’m trying to think of something.”

Sandy eyed him sideways. “The whole world waits in hushed silence, master, while you-“

“What was the color of the license plate on that car Jack Dutton drove into the garage?” Ken asked, unaware that he was interrupting.

“Huh?” Sandy stared at him. “Never mind-I heard you. I was just surprised. Wait while I try to remember.” He shut his eyes in an effort at concentration.

“I remember now,” he said finally. “It was a Florida plate.”

“That’s what I thought,” Ken said. “It suddenly occurred to me, when I mentioned license plates just now, that I’d seen the plate of his

car and noticed it wasn't local."

"Hmm," Sandy said thoughtfully. "And Dutton claims to come from California."

"I don't think that's necessarily significant," Ken said, slowing down for a traffic light. "He said they'd been traveling around. If that's so, they could have bought their plates for this year almost any place."

He turned a corner when the light changed.

"Aren't we going back to the office?" Sandy asked. "And furthermore, what's all this excitement about the license plate if you don't think it's significant?"

"It might be significant in another way," Ken said. "If Ralph's accident was caused the way we think it was-even if we are way off base about the lights-on-a-stick gadget-and if the car that passed him earlier had anything to do with it, it would be nice to know something about that car. And Ralph just might possibly remember the plates on the car that passed him, if we try to jog his memory."

Sandy's eyes lit up, but only for a minute. "It's a long chance," he said. "Ralph wasn't paying any attention to the car, anyway. And it all happened a couple of days ago."

"I know. But we might as well try."

A moment later he pulled to the curb in front of Mort Conner's pleasant white house, but before they had a chance to leave the car, the front door opened. Ralph came out, gestured to them to stay where they were, and came down the walk to speak to them.

"Sorry not to invite you in," he said, "but we've had a grim afternoon." He looked at Sandy. "Your mother was here for a couple of hours. You know how much Mort likes and respects her, Sandy-but she didn't get to first base. That stubborn fool is set on signing that two-year contract, and nothing Mrs. Allen could say had any effect on him."

"How about Ruth?" Sandy asked. "She doesn't want him to go, does she?"

"She'd already given up," Ralph said. "And she wouldn't have said much this afternoon, anyway. She wouldn't have felt she could take sides against him."

"He hasn't signed that South American contract yet, has he?" Sandy asked.

"No. We're both going into New York Tuesday to do that." He dropped his cigarette on the sidewalk and ground it angrily to shreds with his toe. "He won't even wait a week or two-won't even try to get something around here. He keeps saying that if anybody hired us now it would be charity. And every time I suggest that I go down alone, he just about bites my head off."

Then he looked up and managed a slight smile. "But Mom Allen did a great job on him, Sandy. You'd have been proud of her."

There was an awkward silence. Ken broke it abruptly.

"Ralph," he said, "that car that passed you the night of the accident just after you'd left the highway-did you notice its license plate?"

Ralph blinked. "More questions?" Again he managed a slight smile, and then stared off into space thoughtfully for a moment. "I don't think so," he said finally. "At least I can't remember having noticed it. Why?"

"Could it have been a Florida plate?" Ken prodded.

Ralph thought a moment longer. "I'd say no," he decided. "Driving as much as I do, I get sort of a kick out of noticing plates from distant states. So if it had been Florida I think I might have noticed. Since I don't remember it at all, I'd say it was probably from right around here-New Jersey or maybe New York. Why?" he asked again.

"Well," Ken admitted, "Dutton's car has Florida plates, and I thought-"

"Look, Ken," Ralph said, "please lay off Dutton. If he backs out of the deal and dumps the business back in our laps, I don't know what Mort would do-except that I'm pretty sure it would be something desperate. So even if you think you're helping us-and I know you do and we really appreciate it-please stay away from Dutton."

"Sure, Ralph," Ken said quickly. "We understand. We won't do anything that could possibly give him an excuse to back out."

"O.K. Thanks." Ralph stood away from the car. "And now I'd better go back inside and see what new crisis has developed."

Ken jabbed down on the starter Dutton and swung out from the curb with a reckless sweep.

"Hey," Sandy said, "take it easy. Remember these tires are thin." After a moment he added, "What Ralph said doesn't mean that car absolutely couldn't have been Dutton's. Considering what happened to Ralph a few minutes later, he might easily have forgotten the car plates, even if he'd noticed they were from Timbuktu."

"Oh, sure," Ken said disgustedly. "Nothing anybody says means anything. And nothing gets us anywhere."

He didn't say what else he wanted to say-that because the Allens had helped him so much, he was especially eager to be helpful when some of the Allens' friends were in trouble. And instead he seemed to get nowhere, no matter how hopefully he tracked down each slightest clue.

There was one more blow waiting for them when they got back to the office.

Pop and Bert, ready to go home for a quick supper, were already

on their feet. Pop had his coat in one hand. The other held the telephone.

"Wait a minute," he said as the boys came in. "They just arrived. Let them get on an extension and hear this too." He gestured to both the boys. "It's Granger," he explained.

"O.K.?" Granger was asking, as Ken and Sandy each scooped up a phone. And when the boys both assured him they were on, he went ahead. "I've had a quick check made on Tolliver. His mob did try to start a protection racket down on the water front among the fruit and vegetable dealers, but the police broke it up before it got going. They nabbed a few of the underlings, but they couldn't get Tolliver. Since then-that was about eight months ago-he's been very quiet. The police think he's probably got a couple of gambling casinos somewhere, but they haven't tracked them down yet. And that's all. My guess is that Tolliver wanted that trucking business for something connected with the racket he was organizing-and lost interest in it when his plans fell through."

"Any tie-up with Dutton or Withers?" Ken asked.

"Withers," Granger told them, "is a perfectly respectable broker dealing in business real estate. Absolutely nothing against him. Tolliver probably went to him just so his deal would be completely unsuspected."

Granger rustled his notes a moment. The faint sound came over the wire. "As for Dutton," he went on, "there we drew a complete blank. So far as anybody seems to know, he never set foot in this part of the country. He's probably what he says he is-a smalltown man from a small town. The police certainly have no record on him. However," he added, "Wide Vista isn't far from Sacramento and we've got a man out there. I've asked him to do a little quiet looking around, and if I get anything, I'll phone you. But I certainly wouldn't count on big stuff. Wide Vista doesn't sound like a hotbed of criminals." He paused a moment. "O.K.?"

Three voices-Pop's, Sandy's, and Ken's-murmured their thanks. None of them had any further questions to ask.

"Well," Pop said, as they hung up, "that would seem to take care of that." He looked at Ken with a quizzical smile. "Maybe this is really one of those times when my lectures about hard luck don't apply. Maybe hard luck is the only explanation of what's been happening to the Conners."

Sandy and Ken didn't answer. There seemed no point in arguing.

"What did Granger have to say?" Bert wanted to know.

"I'll give you the details while you drive me home," Pop told him. "Come on, you two-we've all got to be back here this evening for another couple of hours, so I'm hoping Mom has supper all ready for

us when we get there.”

Ken and Sandy didn't try to talk on the way home. Sandy drove the convertible into the Allen driveway right behind Bert's car, and all four of them walked into the house together. Bert was looking as glum as they felt.

“Hi, Mom,” Pop called out. “Supper ready? This is Wednesday, you know.”

“No, it isn't ready. And it isn't going to be.” Mom's voice came from the living room.

They exchanged quick startled glances and then all walked through the kitchen and the hall. The living room looked as if a minor hurricane had struck it. Most of the furniture had been pulled away from the wall and stood in the middle of the room. The heavy couch had changed places with the two big chairs that Bert and Pop invariably used. Pictures were piled up on a table.

“What in tarnation, Mom?” Pop demanded.

“I'm moving furniture,” Mom told them, between tight lips. “That Mort Conner made me so angry this afternoon I just had to tear something apart when I came home. Now you can help me. I've decided I want the couch back here after all, and-“

“Mom,” Pop said patiently, “this is Wednesday and we all have to go back to the office tonight. And we're hungry. Can't you-?”

“It won't take long to move the couch,” Mom told him. “Bert will help you. Afterward we'll all go out to eat. I just couldn't cook tonight-I'd ruin anything I put my hand to.”

Pop looked at Bert and shrugged. Then they approached the couch and began to tug it back to its former place.

“As for you two,” Mom turned on the boys, “I want you to take that mirror down from the end of the hall. I'm sick to death of walking in the front door and seeing myself walking right toward me. Sometimes it scares me out of a year's growth.”

“Mom, have a heart,” Sandy pleaded. “That mirror weighs a ton.”

“Well, then, the quicker you get it down, the better off you'll be. Go on now-and leave it at the foot of the stairs when you're finished. You can take it up to the attic later.”

Sandy was grinning in spite of himself as he and Ken walked obediently out into the hall and tackled their job. Pop and Bert were grunting noisily in the living room.

“In all this heat,” Pop muttered, “she decides to move furniture! Women baffle me-they utterly baffle me.”

Sandy had found a screw driver and was loosening the screws that held the heavy mirror to the wall.

“If this is what's happening in our house,” he said to Ken, under his breath, “you can imagine what it was like at the Conners' this

afternoon, before she began to run down.”

“All right.” Mom’s voice, still crackling, came from the living room. “That’s fine. And now the piano. I got it out that far, but I couldn’t swing it around.”

Sandy got ready to loosen the last screw. “O.K.?” he asked Ken. “You holding that side?” Ken didn’t answer and Sandy looked over his shoulder. “Come on-don’t just stand there.”

“I’m not just standing here,” Ken said slowly, “I’m figuring out how Ralph’s accident happened. And this time I know I’m right!”

CHAPTER X

THE PHANTOM CAR

“Come on! Get up!”

The voice penetrated only thinly through Ken’s deep sleep. Then he felt his shoulder being shaken and forced himself to open his eyes. Pop was bending over him.

“At last!” Pop said. “Don’t go back to sleep now!” He swung around and began to shake Sandy.

When both the boys were sitting up in bed, Pop finally started for the door.

“If you hadn’t gone kiting off for food last night when we finished up at the office,” he told them before he left, “you wouldn’t have slept through the alarm.”

“We didn’t go off for food,” Sandy mumbled. “We-“

“We’ll be ready in less than five minutes, Pop,” Ken cut in quickly.

“You’d better be,” Pop told them. “This is Thursday, in case you’re too sleepy to know it. And for the last twenty-five years the *Advance* has hit the streets every Thursday at eleven thirty-eleven thirty a.m. that is,” he added pointedly.

“O.K.” Sandy swung his feet over the side of the bed.

“We’re awake-honest. The readers will get their favorite paper on time.”

“They’d better,” Pop grunted, and then they heard his feet pounding down the stairs.

“I almost told him what we were doing last night,” Sandy muttered apologetically.

“It’s all right. You didn’t.” Ken yawned and looked at the clock. “Four hours of sleep isn’t enough for me.”

But they got dressed before Pop called upstairs after them again, and hurried through their breakfast. Mom served them with something less than her usual cheerfulness, but none of them teased her about her furious furniture moving.

Pop and Bert, as usual, drove off together. The boys followed in their convertible.

“There’s one thing I’m going to do today, even if we are busy at the office,” Sandy said, backing skillfully out of the driveway. “If this car is going to be racing up that hill tonight, at better than a mile a minute, I’m going to have new tires put on her first.”

“Good idea,” Ken agreed. “Let’s leave her at Joe’s service station right now. The last thing we want tonight is another accident.”

Joe came out from under a car on the lift as they drove into the

station. "Hi," he said. "What'll it be?"

"A really big deal," Ken assured him. "Four new tires."

"Wow!" Joe said. "All at once?"

"Unfortunately we've got four wheels," Sandy said. "Pick out the best of the old ones for our spare, will you?"

"Sure thing. When do you want the car back?"

"We need it by this evening. Late afternoon be all right?" Ken asked.

"Any time after three," Joe told them.

They walked the short distance to the office and were immediately plunged into the whirl of activity that always preceded the *Advance's* weekly deadline. Sandy called a dozen telephone numbers, in rapid succession. Ken and Bert both dashed out of the office and back again several times, with last-minute news items. Pop, from the command post of his own desk, issued sharp orders and handled all the freshly inked galleys and proof sheets that Hank kept bringing in for final O.K.'s. And in the back room the press rumbled steadily, shaking the building with its ponderous weight.

By eleven o'clock the first complete newspapers were carried into the front office, and Pop ordered all hands to the task of rolling and sealing the papers that would be shipped to out-of-town subscribers on the noon mail train. Newsboys began to line up at the back door, and by 11:27 the first ones were on the street with their wares. At 11:29 Bert left in the truck to drop off stacks of papers at the larger local newsstands.

One more issue of the *Advance* was out-and on time.

But the presses kept rolling. The newsboys came back for additional supplies. At one thirty the staff of the *Advance* found time for a quick sandwich, but it wasn't until three that the print shop and the front office both finally quieted down.

Bert found the cover of his typewriter half in and half out of his laden wastebasket. With a gesture of finality he dropped it on his machine.

"I don't know about you wage slaves," he said firmly, "but I'm going to knock off and drive out to the lake for a swim. Next Thursday is still a week away."

Ken and Sandy looked at each other. Sandy nodded.

"We'd like a swim too," Ken said, "but we'd like to talk to you and Pop for a minute first." He paused briefly. "We've figured out how Ralph was forced off the road last Saturday," he said.

"You what?" Pop stopped mopping his forehead and held the handkerchief poised over one eye.

"We discovered how it was done-or rather," Ken corrected himself, "how it could have been done with no danger to anyone."

“Except Ralph,” Sandy added.

Bert sat down on the edge of his desk. “How?”

“We’d rather not tell you. We’d rather show you-tonight,” Ken said. “And Mort and Ralph too.”

Pop put his handkerchief back into his pocket. “What kind of stunt is this?” he asked suspiciously.

“It’s not a stunt. Pop,” Sandy assured him. “You’ll see. Will you come along tonight to Sugarloaf Hill?”

Pop looked over at Bert. “What do you think?”

“I think yes,” Bert said. “If there’s any chance at all-” He broke off and reached for the phone. “I’ll persuade Ralph and Mort to come too.”

But the phone rang before he could pick it up and a moment later Bert was motioning to Sandy to take it.

“Hello,” Sandy said. “Joe?” He listened for a moment. “No,” he said finally. “Leave it the way it is. We’ll be right over.”

“Car ready?” Ken asked as he hung up.

“Not quite,” Sandy said. “But it will be by the time we get over there. He said to come along now.”

Bert, who had been using another phone in the meantime, was also just finishing his conversation.

“The Conners aren’t happy about the idea,” he reported, “but they’ll play along once more. What time?”

“We ought to start out about nine thirty,” Ken said.

“O.K. I’ll let them know.” Bert grinned. “And I guarantee Pop will come too, whether he wants to or not.”

“Oh, I’ll come all right,” Pop muttered.

Bert and Pop started off for the lake, with a detour past the Allen house to pick up their bathing suits and to persuade Mom to go along. The boys promised to join them if their car was ready in time.

Ken waited until he and Sandy were out of the office. “Let’s have it,” he said. “What did Joe tell you that made you look so peculiar? What did you want left the way it was?”

“Joe found the left front wheel loose,” Sandy said. “When he took off the inner hubcap to see what was wrong, he found the cotter pin broken off and the nut practically unscrewed. He said that if we’d driven another half hour the nut and the wheel both would have come off.”

Ken whistled. “A broken cotter pin-the same thing that caused one of the Conner accidents! History’s repeating itself. Maybe we’ve stepped on somebody’s toes,” he added thoughtfully.

“And maybe after tonight we’ll be able to find out whose they are,” Sandy said grimly.

Joe was pumping gasoline into a car when they arrived, but he

gestured toward the lift where the convertible was raised a foot or so off the ground. The boys walked over to look at it. The inner hubcap had been removed from the left front wheel and the nut was exposed.

Sandy touched it carefully. "Loose," he said. He looked closer and saw, in the grease in the wheel hub, the two pieces of the broken cotter pin.

Joe joined them. "Who's been working on this car?" he demanded.

"Nobody but you," Sandy told him. "You packed the front wheel bearings three weeks ago."

Joe glared at him. "I didn't put that cotter pin in. I use new ones. This one has been used so many times that it broke through where it was bent back. And another thing-I bend both tips of the pin back whenever I install one. Whoever did this bent only one. If both tips had been bent over, the pin would have held even if one side did break off."

"Couldn't it have been a defective pin?" Ken asked.

"Not on your life. Look at this thing-it must have been installed and removed a dozen times. That's a dangerous thing, especially on a front wheel. And it's not me who did it!"

"We know it wasn't, Joe," Sandy said quickly. "Bert may have had some work done on the car when he took it out of town last week."

Ken looked at Sandy curiously for a moment. Sandy knew as well as he did that Bert had no work done on the convertible when he borrowed it for a single evening the week before. Sandy sent him a warning glance and Ken dutifully nodded his assent to Sandy's suggestion.

Joe's glare faded. "Well, you'd better check on it. You wouldn't want to go back a second time to any mechanic who would do a thing like this."

"We'll do that," Sandy said.

Joe went to work then, tightening the nut and installing a new cotter pin. "There," he said finally, "that's not going to break off in a million years."

There was still time for a brief swim before supper, and both boys felt refreshed but keyed up when they returned home a few minutes behind Bert's car.

"I've been thinking," Ken said, as Sandy braked to a stop, "that maybe we ought to switch cars for tonight. If you're going to race up that hill, I'd feel a lot better if you did it in Bert's car or Pop's. We can't be sure something else on ours hasn't been tampered with."

"All right," Sandy agreed. "Bert's would be better. Let's move the gadget then, while we've got a chance to do it privately."

Carefully they lifted out of their own luggage compartment a sizable object draped in black cloth, and transferred it to the back of

Bert's car.

"I hope this thing works," Ken muttered.

At nine thirty that night the convertible and Bert's car pulled up in front of the Conner house and Ralph and Mort came out. Ken was at the wheel of the boys' car, with Bert beside him and Pop in the back seat. Sandy was alone in the other car.

"Will you go with Sandy?" Ken asked Mort. "And, Ralph, will you get in the back of this car with Pop?"

"Sure," Mort said. "We'll do anything you say."

A minute later, with the convertible in the lead, the two cars started for Sugarloaf Hill. Ken went over the top, down the far side, and on to the point where the old hill road joined the new highway. There he swung around. Bert's coupe followed.

"We're now going up the hill just as you did that night, Ralph," Ken said over his shoulder.

Almost immediately there was the hoot of a horn behind them, and Sandy drove Bert's car past at high speed. Its taillights diminished quickly in the darkness ahead. Ken didn't comment on it.

Instead he said, "There's just one thing." Again he glanced briefly back at Ralph. "No matter what happens on the hill tonight-no matter what you think is going to happen-don't grab for the wheel. Just sit tight. Nobody's going to be hurt."

"What's this all about, Ken?" Ralph asked. "Is this another light-on-a-stick idea?"

Ken grinned. "This is the McCoy, we think. I'm doing thirty-five," he added. "Is that what you were doing?"

"A little more," Ralph said, and Ken pressed the accelerator a little harder. "That's it. Then I dropped to thirty-five when I hit the grade."

A moment later they started up the hill and Ken let the speed decrease.

"Can all of you see the road ahead clearly?" Ken asked.

"Perfectly," Pop replied.

"I dropped to thirty about midway up," Ralph said.

"I know," Ken told him. "I will too."

In spite of Ralph's doubting mood the air of tension in the car grew stronger as the convertible moved up the hill.

"Drop off to thirty," Ralph directed.

"Right," Ken said.

Half a minute went by and then fifteen seconds more.

"Remember," Ken cautioned. "Take it easy."

Another thirty seconds passed. The convertible's headlights were just beginning to illuminate the white of the warning sign on the summit.

"You're getting close." Ralph's voice had gone dry.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Pop said.

“It was right up there that-“

“Look out!” Pop’s bellow cut Ralph off short and almost made Ken leap out of his seat.

Directly ahead of them on the crest-and bearing down on the convertible in its own lane-was a pair of brilliant headlights.

“Pull over!” Pop reached across the seat and made a grab for the wheel.

Bert caught his flailing arms before they could wrap themselves around Ken.

The car was screaming to a halt, wheels locked, and skidding under the thrust of Ken’s braking.

But still the headlights came closer, their brilliant rays pouring blindingly at them.

Pop made another desperate lunge just as the convertible stopped.

Ken fought him off. “It’s O.K., Pop! It’s O.K.”

“It was just like the other night!” Ralph gasped. “Just the same-!” He stopped suddenly and threw himself forward. “Where is it? Where’d the car go?”

Only a few seconds had passed since they had first seen the glaring headlights. A split second before, the lights had been almost on top of them. But ahead of them now there was nothing but the empty road and the white warning sign that stared back at them out of the darkness.

There was no visible trace of another car.

CHAPTER XI

CLEAN BILL OF HEALTH

"That's what I want to know," Pop said. His voice was almost as shaky as Ralph's. "Where is it?"

"You did all see headlights bearing down on us?" Ken asked. "You're sure of that?"

"What are you trying to do-kid us?" Pop demanded. "'Of course we saw them. What we want to know is what happened to the car. It didn't swing around past us. I can swear to that."

"It didn't swing around past us-and it was never in front of us either," Ken said. "There was no car. We--"

"There was no car!" Pop repeated explosively. "What are you--?"

Ken tapped the horn Dutton several times. "Look up ahead," he said.

In the twin beams from their headlights a figure appeared, climbing up the last few feet of the steep gully wall to the shoulder of the road. Right behind him was a second. An instant later Mort and Sandy were directly in the glow of the lights, waving. Then they turned toward the gully and began to haul on a light rope.

A strange-looking contraption rose slowly into view and lurched onto the shoulder and then into the roadway. It was barely visible even in the strong light, but it appeared to be roughly rectangular-several feet across and perhaps three feet high. A shroud of black cloth seemed to envelop it completely.

"What in the name of--?" Pop began.

Again Ken cut him off by tapping the horn Dutton.

They saw Sandy reach toward one corner of the object.

And suddenly, again, a brilliant pair of headlights was glaring into their eyes.

Bert gasped. And then there was a split second of complete silence. The headlights ahead of them were motionless now. Otherwise, they looked just as they had before-two blinding signals of an oncoming car.

Then Pop came to life.

"A mirror!" he roared.

"A mirror?" Ralph repeated the words blankly, as if they were in some tongue entirely foreign to him.

Bert reacted faster. "Of course!" he shouted. "A mirror! Those are our own lights, reflected back at us."

"But--" Ralph still sounded completely confused.

"You've guessed it," Ken told Pop and Bert. "Come on out and look

at it.”

A moment later they were all surrounding the object on the road. Sandy was recovering it with a length of heavy black cloth.

“I gather it worked all right,” he said, grinning. “See, this is how we did it. There’s a black string tied to the cloth. When I gave it a jerk the cloth slid off-and the glass threw your own lights back at you.”

Pop and Bert bent down to examine the heavy board on which the mirror had been mounted, and the supporting wires that ran from the four corners of the board to the two upper corners of the mirror.

“How did it look from where you were, Ralph?” Mort asked.

Ralph shook his head as if he still couldn’t believe what had happened. “Just the way it looked the other night,” he said. “Just exactly. I thought we were in for another crash. I froze up completely. I-“

Pop broke in on him, “It’s a good thing you did, otherwise we both would have made a grab for the wheel.” He turned to Mort. “It was absolutely uncanny-we all thought there was a car heading right for us.”

“All of us except Ken,” Bert corrected. “Come on. Tell us how it worked from your end,” he asked Sandy.

“Mort can tell you,” Sandy said.

Mort grinned faintly. “There isn’t much to tell-that’s the beauty of the trick. Anybody could do it, alone if necessary. We passed you back there right after we all turned into this road, and came up here pretty fast. When we got to the crest we jumped out, took the mirror gadget out from the luggage compartment, and set it up right on the road, and then I got back in the car and drove it out of sight over the crest. There was time for me to get back here before you came up. We both hid behind that warning sign, and when you were about a hundred feet away, Sandy jerked the cloth off. As soon as you’d stopped, he pulled the whole thing right off the road and down the gully out of sight.”

“Of course if you’d been Sandy’s partner in an actual presentation of this thing-the way we think it was done the other night,” Ken said, “you’d probably have stayed in the car, Mort. Then, if something went wrong -if the trick didn’t work-you could have driven the car down the hill and away, and come back for the second man when the coast was clear.”

“One reason why we think we’re on the right track with this gadget,” Sandy put in, “is because we found some marks along here.” He described the scrape marks on the shoulder and the gouges down the gully wall.

“We made the same kind of gouges tonight,” he added. “I just looked at them with my flashlight. This thing is heavy”-he touched the

mirror “-and when I pulled it off the road it went right on down the hill. I was hanging on to it by a cord, but I had to go down after it. I stopped it within a couple of yards and dragged it back. But I guess the villain of the other night had to go all the way to the bottom.”

Pop suddenly took command. “This thing has got too many angles to it to thresh them all out standing here in the middle of the road,” he said. “Let’s go back to the *Advance* where we can talk sitting down.” When they had all piled back into the two cars, with the mirror gadget in Bert’s luggage compartment, Pop added to Ken, “Drive past Andy Kane’s house on the way. I think it’s about time he got in on this.”

It took awhile to bring Police Chief Kane up to date. At Pop’s suggestion the boys told him why they decided Ralph had been tricked, and how they had set about looking for evidences of trickery. They admitted their first mistaken attempt at a solution-the lights-on-a-stick idea-and told how Mom’s furniture-moving spree had given Ken an inspiration.

“Is that Mom’s mirror you were using tonight?” Pop demanded at that point. Sandy nodded. Pop shook his head. “You’d better get it back in good shape. I don’t know what she’d say if anything happened to it.”

“She’d say it had gone in a good cause,” Bert said.

“I guess you’re right,” Pop agreed. “All right, boys. Go ahead with your story.”

“Well, that about brings us up to tonight,” Ken said. “And you, Ralph, know better than any of us whether tonight’s experiment worked or not.”

“It worked, all right.” Ralph looked soberly at Andy Kane. “I can’t swear that it was a mirror that threw me off the road the other night. But I can certainly swear that it could have been a mirror. What happened tonight was exactly like what happened the night of my crash.”

None of them spoke for a moment.

“Are you all waiting for me to say something about this?” Kane asked. “Because if you are I’ve got to admit that you seem to have figured out a way that Ralph’s crash could have happened-and without anybody having to risk his own neck in an effort to break Ralph’s. But my first question is: Who? Who would have done such a thing? And my next question is: Why? You two got any answers to those, too?”

Ken shook his head. “We’ve discussed the whole thing with Mort and Ralph. Everybody seems to agree that it couldn’t have been done by any personal enemies of the Connors, because there aren’t any such enemies.”

"That's right," Kane agreed. "There aren't any that I ever heard of."

"But if you put together all the things that have happened to the Conners in the last four months," Ken went on, "you do get a hint of a motive."

"What motive?" Kane asked.

Sandy took it up. "The result of all the Conner 'accidents' resulted in the cancellation of their insurance. And *that* resulted in them having to sell their business."

Kane looked startled. "You're accusing the new owner of having had a hand in all this? That's a pretty serious charge to make, you know." He glanced at Mort and Ralph. "What do you think of all this?"

"I don't know," Mort admitted. "Two hours ago I wouldn't have believed a word of it. But I know the mirror trick worked. Now I don't know what I do believe."

"But why should anybody want your business that badly?" Kane asked. "Sure, it was a good business. But there were probably other trucking businesses available -without making all that effort and running all that risk. No business would be worth the kind of shenanigans the boys are suggesting."

"Maybe to a man like Tolliver such things wouldn't seem so unusual as they do to us," Ken offered.

"Tolliver? Who's he?" the police chief asked.

"He's a man who wanted to buy us out six months ago," Mort told him. Then he turned to Ken. "You can't count him in on this. He's no longer interested-I asked the broker about him."

"Sure," Ken agreed. "We know that. But we also know that Tolliver is supposed to be one of the big names behind gambling and racketeering in New York."

"Hold on a minute!" Kane said. "What's this all about? You're going too fast for me. How do you know about Tolliver?"

Quickly Ken related the conversations with Granger of Global News. "So," he concluded, "if Tolliver wanted to buy the Conner business and they refused to sell, why shouldn't he have rigged up all these 'accidents' just in order to get it?"

"But he didn't buy the business when it did become available," Kane pointed out. "Someone else did."

"But how do we know Dutton isn't acting as a front man for Tolliver?" Ken asked.

"Go easy here, Ken," Pop put in. "Don't forget Granger couldn't find any connection between the two men. In fact, he couldn't find anything on Dutton at all."

"I know," Ken said. "But there might be a connection just the same. It seems reasonable that Tolliver would have picked an out-of-

town man for the job-somebody who was a stranger in these parts. It would be safer that way. Couldn't you do some checking on Dutton?" he asked Kane.

"Now wait a minute." Kane began to pace up and down in an aisle between two desks. "You're suggesting that all the accidents, including the last one, were rigged up by somebody who wanted to buy the Conner business?"

"That's right," Sandy said.

"But you have no proof," Kane retorted. "You've shown that the last accident *could* have been rigged-but not that it was. You have no evidence about the previous mishaps. You can't connect Tolliver with Dutton. And yet you want me to start an official inquiry about a man who seems to be completely innocent of everything but buying the Conner business at a bargain price."

"There are a couple of things we haven't told you yet," Ken said. "Those gouges we found in the gully lead right down into a bed of poison ivy. And Dutton's son Bob is suffering from a severe case of ivy poisoning."

Ralph and Mort looked startled at that, but Kane remained unimpressed.

"There are plenty of places in this world where a man can pick up poison ivy," he said. "Did he say where he got it?"

"His father says he got it fishing," Ken admitted. "But--"

"Never mind the *but's* now," Kane told him. "Can you prove he's lying?"

"No. Of course not. But--"

"But what about our front wheel?" Sandy burst out.

They all stared at him.

"What about your front wheel?" Pop demanded.

Sandy described quickly what Joe had found.

"A broken cotter pin?" Ralph repeated. "Why, that's the thing that caused one of our accidents!"

Pop looked serious. "It might have caused another one in this case. Why didn't you two tell me about this earlier?"

Sandy grinned sheepishly. "We were afraid we'd have enough trouble persuading you to come out to Sugarloaf Hill for our experiment tonight. We didn't want to complicate things."

Kane shoved his cap back and scratched his head. "I'm sure Joe was right when he said he didn't put that pin in. He's a good mechanic."

"So are the Conners," Bert broke in. "And yet they--"

Kane, intent on his own thoughts, went on in spite of Bert's attempted interruption. "But for you to think somebody did such a thing to you deliberately--! Why would they have done it?"

"Maybe because somebody thinks we know something," Ken suggested.

"Well, have you been talking to anybody about your ideas-anybody except us?" Kane asked.

"Not exactly. But I did say in front of Dutton yesterday that Sandy and I had to check on the Tolliver story," Ken admitted, careful not to look at Pop as he spoke.

"And right after that," Sandy pointed out, "we find out somebody's been fooling with our front wheel. I suppose that's just a coincidence?"

Kane pursed his lips in and out a moment. "How did he react to the mention of Tolliver's name?"

"He didn't," Ken said.

"But you're certain he's responsible for your wheel, eh?"

"Well, it makes sense," Sandy insisted.

"But it doesn't make evidence," Kane replied. He looked at Mort. "I've heard about this clause in your contract with Dutton-the one that permits him to back out if there's any local prejudice against him. Suppose I do what these boys seem to want. Suppose I ask the police of wherever he comes from-and I don't even know that-"

"Wide Vista, California," Ken said.

"All right. Wide Vista." The chief gave Ken a short nod. "Suppose the Wide Vista police start making inquiries about Dutton. And friends of his find out about it and write to tell him. What's he going to do with the contract?"

"I've been thinking about that," Mort said slowly. "I can't dismiss all the things Ken and Sandy have dug up. But on the other hand, if Dutton is innocent-and if he thinks he has a reason to dump our worthless business back on our hands again-" He shrugged. "I don't know what to say."

Kane faced the boys. "Look, you two," he said, "I appreciate all you've discovered. I agree a good many suspicious-sounding circumstances have turned up. But I also claim you haven't proved your theory-or any part of it. And if I were to launch an investigation based on your unproved statements, I'd be abusing my power as a policeman."

He paused soberly, and no one spoke.

"Suppose someone came to me and said he'd seen you two snooping around Sugarloaf Hill and thought you were responsible for Ralph's wreck," Kane went on, "and said you should be investigated. Would you think I had the right to ask your neighbors about you-inquire into all sorts of details of your life-just because someone had made unsupported accusations against you?"

"Andy's right," Pop said. "I'm not saying your theory isn't logical-

and even perhaps true,” he told the boys. “I’m merely saying I agree with his stand.”

“Give me one real clue, one bit of concrete evidence,” Kane said, “and I’ll be justified in moving in.”

“Well, maybe we will have something for you pretty soon,” Sandy said. “Global News is having their Sacramento man do a little quiet checking in Wide Vista.”

“That’s O.K. with me,” Kane said. “Global News can do things I can’t. And if you turn up something unsavory about Dutton’s reputation, just let me know.”

“We will,” Sandy muttered. “Don’t worry about that.”

“We should have heard something by now,” Ken said suddenly. “Maybe a message came in after Granger left for the night, and nobody phoned it to us.”

“Why not give the office a call?” Pop suggested.

Six pairs of eyes remained fastened on Ken as he picked up a phone and got his connection. Six pairs of ears heard him explain who he was and what he wanted.

“Granger was having your Sacramento man follow it up,” Ken concluded, “and I wondered if any word had come in from him.”

There was a pause. “He’s looking on Granger’s desk,” Ken said over his shoulder. Then he spoke into the phone again. “Yes ... Yes, that’s it! Of Wide Vista. I’ll take it down.”

The voice on the other end of the wire was a distant unintelligible murmur. Ken’s pencil moved quickly. Finally he hung up and turned around.

“I’ll read you what the Sacramento man reported,” he said. His voice sounded flat and tired. “ ‘Dutton, Randolph, widower. Two sons-Jack and Bob. Highly respected in community. Owned small trucking business. Retired because of ill health. Last heard from by his friends while traveling in Florida. Sons believed to be with him. Son Jack well known in town as former star of high school football team.’ ” Ken sighed heavily. “That’s all,” he said.

“And I guess that’s that,” Andy Kane said, with a note of finality.

CHAPTER XII

FOLLOWED?

Downstairs the big grandfather clock struck midnight. Ken and Sandy, upstairs in their bedroom, had turned the light off half an hour before. But each of them knew that the other was wide awake.

Sandy kicked the sheet to the foot of his bed. "Why doesn't it rain and cool off a little?" he muttered.

"Why did the Duttons have to turn out to be highly respected members of their community?" Ken muttered back. "You wouldn't mind the heat if you thought we were getting somewhere with this problem-and neither would I."

There was silence in the dark room for a moment and then Ken added, "I wish there was some chance that the Global News man who did the checking had made a mistake."

"That would be fine," Sandy agreed. "But Global News always gets its facts straight. If you don't believe me, ask your father."

"I know. I know." Ken gave his own sheet an angry kick. "The Duttons are respectable-I accept that as a fact."

Suddenly he sat straight up in bed, a shadowy figure dimly visible in the faint glow that penetrated a window from a street lamp half a block away. "But are we sure," he asked slowly, "that the man who just bought the Conner garage is really Mr. Dutton of Wide Vista?"

"Huh?" The single syllable was a grunt of surprise. Sandy too now sat up, but more deliberately. "I don't see how we can doubt it," he said carefully. "Everything the Duttons have said, including the stuff about Jack playing football, checks with the report from Wide Vista."

"I see how we can doubt it," Ken said. His voice was firmer with every word he spoke. "I can doubt anything."

"Don't I know it?" Sandy grinned in the dark. "But go on-explain yourself. What reason have you got for saying Mr. Dutton is not Mr. Dutton?"

"Look at it this way," Ken said. He settled himself against the headboard of the bed, with his arms around his drawn-up knees. "Suppose I was a crook. And suppose I had some scheme afoot that involved buying a trucking business in-well, let's say a town called Podunk. I wouldn't want to give my right name-it might be recognized. I'd want a new name, preferably one that had a good solid background behind it-a background that would stand some checking."

"Go ahead," Sandy said when Ken paused. "I'm listening."

"I'm just trying to think it through," Ken said. "All right-I'm the crook, remember. My real name is Ken Holt, but the police know that

name. So when I arrive in Podunk to buy a trucking business I use another name. I don't just make one up. That would be too risky. Somebody might find out that the character I was pretending to be had never existed until that moment. Instead I say I'm Sandy Allen of Brentwood."

"Wise man," Sandy said in mock congratulation. "You've picked yourself a good solid trustworthy name."

"Exactly," Ken said, ignoring the tone of Sandy's voice. "I've taken the trouble to find out about you first, so that I can talk convincingly about the paper my father owns-the paper the real Sandy Allen's father owns, that is. I've learned the names of the streets in Brentwood, and so forth, so that I can give a good performance as a Brentwood citizen. And if anybody-the Podunk police or the bank or what have you-wants to check up on Sandy Allen by writing to Brentwood, he'll get a good report."

"Of course," Sandy said, still mockingly. "Anybody in Brentwood would say that Sandy Allen is a fine fellow-honest, hard working, brilliant." He leaned toward Ken and added, "And the report would also say that there's something rotten in the city of Podunk-because Sandy Allen is in Brentwood at that very moment. Therefore, anybody in Podunk who claims to be Sandy Allen must obviously be out of his mind or up to no good."

"Oh, no," Ken contradicted. "I've taken care of that possibility. I don't try to use your name unless I'm sure you're away somewhere-traveling around the country, let's say, and last heard from in Florida. So far as Brentwood knows, you could be anywhere. Brentwood isn't a bit surprised to find that you-that a Sandy Allen, that is-has turned up in Podunk."

"I see." Sandy was silent for a long moment. "I see," he said again. "It's not so crazy after all. The way you've got it worked out, it just might happen. The Dutton who bought the Conner business may not be the real Dutton at all. He may just be somebody using that man's name, because it's a good safe name to use and could stand up under checking."

"That's right."

Neither of them spoke for a few seconds.

"But look, Ken," said Sandy, "I grant you it might work-for a short time. But that kind of impersonation couldn't go on forever. The real Duttons might go back home to Wide Vista. Or they might even just write a post card home, saying they'd been in business in Florida for six months. If anything like that happened, the people who had originally vouched for the fake Duttons would know that something was wrong."

"I realize that," Ken agreed. "But if Dutton-the man we know as

Dutton-is really a crook, and has borrowed an honest man's name, he may not need it for long. Maybe he just needs it for a week or so and feels sure he can safely use it that long."

"But what scheme could he be cooking up that would be over and done with in a week?" Sandy asked.

"I don't know," Ken agreed. "I haven't got that far. But the more I think about it, the more convinced I am that our Mr. Dutton isn't in town to operate a legitimate trucking business."

"There's one very obvious argument against that statement," Sandy pointed out. "If he doesn't plan to operate a trucking business, why is he going to all the trouble and expense of having an inspection pit dug in the garage?"

"How do we know he is?" Ken demanded. "He might have talked about it-even told Fred Ayres to dig it-just to help build up the picture of himself as a garage owner opening a perfectly honest business. But for all we know, he called the whole thing off today-told Ayres he'd changed his mind, or something. We haven't seen the garage today. We don't know whether Ayres actually began the job or not."

"Well," Sandy said, "that will be easy enough to check. We can walk past the garage tomorrow and--"

"Why wait?" Ken slid off the bed. "Why not go down there now?"

Sandy grabbed Ken's flapping pajama jacket. "Are you crazy? It's after midnight. Why can't we--?"

"We can take a flashlight and look through a window," Ken said, pulling away from Sandy's grasp. "It'll only take a minute. If the pit is being dug, we'll know there's probably something wrong with my reasoning. If it isn't-You're not sleepy, are you?" he added.

"No. With this thing going in circles in my head-and with the heat on top of everything else-" Sandy swung his feet to the floor. "All right. I'll come with you. But I still think it's a wacky idea."

They had been talking quietly, in order not to disturb the rest of the house. And by mutual agreement they crept silently down the stairs in their rubber-soled shoes. As a further precaution against arousing the rest of the Allens they agreed to walk rather than get the car out of the garage, since Pop had locked the garage that night for the first time in years. He had offered no explanation, but it was clear that he was disturbed by the broken cotter pin Joe had found in the front wheel of the boys' car.

"If there's anything to this impersonation idea of mine," Ken said, as they moved under the lacy shadows of the trees bordering the sidewalk, "I think there's also something to the idea that it wouldn't work for long. So if Dutton is up to something we may not have much time to find out what it is."

"I know how we can check up on him!" Sandy stopped still in his

excitement. "Why didn't we think of it before?"

"Think of what?"

"We'll get a picture of him and send it to Wide Vista! A man may be able to change his name easily enough, but it's harder to change his face."

"Swell!" Ken grinned. "Of course we should have thought of it before. Let's stop in at the office so you can get your camera-just on the off chance that Dutton might be at the garage tonight."

"'Off chance' is right," Sandy said. "What would he be doing there now?"

"Who knows? If he's an honest man, he's probably fast asleep at his hotel. If he's a crook-" Ken shrugged. "In fact, if he does happen to be at the garage, I think it would be one more bit of evidence that he's not what he appears to be."

He took Sandy's arm and pulled him on again. "Anyway, the sooner you get a picture, the better. So let's not waste even this thin possibility."

Brentwood seemed sound asleep. Even Main Street, when they approached it, was silent and deserted. The traffic lights were still operating, but they crossed against a red stop signal without bothering to more than glance in each direction. The first car they had seen since they left the house also dashed across Main Street, a block to their left, just as they reached the curb.

"Either that's one of Andy Kane's squad cars, or that driver is more willing to take chances than I am," Sandy said. "When I'm in a car I'm law-abiding about red lights-even when nobody is in sight."

"So long as none of Andy's men spot us," Ken said, "I refuse to worry about what else they're doing. But I'd just as soon Andy didn't know we're prowling around on this business tonight-unless we happen to discover something worth telling him, that is."

"Right," Sandy agreed.

Ken grinned. "Fugitives from the law-that's us."

When they reached the *Advance* office, on South First Avenue, Sandy took his key from his pocket and unlocked the door. By the pale glow of the single night light they crossed to the doorway that opened on the cellar stairs. Ken waited while Sandy hurried down to his darkroom and returned with his small camera.

When they reached the front door again, Sandy paused with his hand on the knob.

"There's a car parked halfway down the block," he said quietly. "Do you suppose it's one of Andy's-the same one we saw before?"

Ken leaned close to the glass to peer out. "I don't think so," he said. "It doesn't look like a squad car. Looks more like a convertible, though it's hard to tell in the dark."

“Well, let’s go out the back way just to play safe,”

Sandy suggested. “If it is Andy’s men, and they decided to stroll down here to see who we were, and then happened to mention to Pop in the morning that we were around the office at this hour, we’d be stuck with an explanation to him. And right now I’m no more eager to tell Pop what we’re doing tonight than I am to tell Andy.”

“O.K.”

They walked back through the length of the front office and on through the darkened print shop until they reached the rear exit. Five minutes later they were on Main Street again, at the bank corner.

“Through the alley?” Ken asked.

“Sure.” Sandy led the way down the narrow passage alongside the bank to the alley at the far end of it. There he halted abruptly. Across the alley was the big bulk of the garage, its dark shape marked by glowing yellow rectangles.

“Lights on in the garage,” Sandy muttered. “That’s one for your side.”

Ken was silent a moment. “Those windows are too high to look through,” he said. “How about the ones on the side? Think we can see through them?”

“I’ve forgotten their location,” Sandy admitted. “We’ll have to go look.”

They slipped silently across the alley and around the corner of the garage into the open space where Mort Conner had once parked his big trailers. The space was completely empty at the moment, and completely dark.

The side wall of the garage, like the rear wall, was pierced by four large steel-framed windows. They paused at the first one, but even when Sandy stretched on tiptoe, he was inches short of seeing over the sill. The ground sloped upward, however, toward North First Avenue, so they moved quietly along to the next window. It was too high and they moved on again.

Sandy could look comfortably through the third window, but he reported that the view was entirely blocked by the light delivery truck parked directly in front of it.

“One more,” Ken murmured. As he led the way toward the last window, nearest the front of the building, he whispered over his shoulder, “Watch out up here. There’s a line of oil drums along the wall.”

“I see them,” Sandy whispered back.

The line of drums ran beneath the window, and they had to edge between them and the wall. It meant moving sideways to fit into the narrow space, but when they reached the window, they forgot the nuisance of the drums. Sandy’s head rose a foot above the sill and Ken

too could see over it.

For a moment they peered at the glass, blinking hopelessly. It was covered with dust and grime. But after a moment they had adjusted their eyes and could make out shapes in the big room beyond. When they found the cleanest part of the pane, they could clearly see the rear part of the garage-the section containing the workbench along the rear wall.

Ken noticed immediately that there was a great hole in the floor, and a pile of earth mounded beside it. He sighed. Dutton was having the pit dug after all-his theory had already been disproved.

Then he squinted to get a better look. There were men standing around the hole-three of them, he thought.

"O.K.," he breathed to Sandy. "So he's having the pit dug. But why the crowd? Who are they?"

Sandy rubbed slowly and softly at one section of the glass. "Helps a little," he muttered, putting his eye to the cleaned-off area. "But most of the dirt seems to be on the inside."

Ken, too, rubbed at the glass. "There's Dutton," he said after a moment. "Facing this way. Any chance of getting his picture from here?"

"Not much. I guess that's the two boys with him, isn't it? Bob and Jack?"

"Looks like it." But even as Ken said the words he realized that Dutton, who was speaking, seemed to be directing his words away from the two men he called his sons. His words were inaudible, but he seemed to be addressing them to someone out of Ken's range of vision. He pointed down at the freshly dug pit as he spoke.

Suddenly two more men came into view and stood at the edge of the pit. One was short and slim. The other was much taller and heavier. Both wore hats which shaded their faces from the lights high up on the garage ceiling, but Ken didn't think he had ever seen either of them before.

"Wish we could hear what they're saying" he whispered.

Sandy didn't answer. Instead he grabbed Ken's arm and forced it downward. "Car coming," he muttered. "If we're still trying to keep out of the law's way, we'd better duck down here behind these drums. This would be a worse place to be spotted than the office."

Ken could see the car's headlights too, moving slowly along North First Avenue toward the garage. Then the lights paused and swung inward toward them.

They both dropped down behind the oil drums.

The car's lights raked the wall directly over their heads and they could hear the crunch of gravel as the tires ground their way over the rough surface of the lot. They held themselves rigid, without

breathing, as the car finally halted only a few feet from where they crouched.

The engine died and then they heard the car door open and close. Footsteps sounded on the gravel and faded away. From the front of the garage came the sound of the door opening, followed by the thump of its closing.

Ken raised himself and risked a cautious glance over the top of the drum that had concealed him. The car seemed empty. He touched Sandy's shoulder reassuringly-

The redhead too stood up. "That's no squad car," he said instantly.

"No," Ken answered. "It's a convertible-and it looks like the one we saw near the office a few minutes ago."

"What's it doing here?" Sandy asked. "Following us?"

CHAPTER XIII

MIDNIGHT RECONNAISSANCE

"Following us?" Ken repeated. "How could that be? Even if somebody tailed us to the *Advance* office, he'd think we were still there, unless he can see right through a couple of brick walls and watched us leave by the back door."

"He could easily guess there is a back door and decide we'd left by it when we didn't come out the other way."

"Maybe you're right," Ken admitted. "But right now I'd like to find out what's going on here." He gestured toward the window and they both peered once more through the pane.

The men inside were still standing around the excavation that had been dug in the floor, but now they were all looking at a sixth man, apparently the one who had just arrived in the car. He had his back to the boys and all they could see was that he appeared to be of medium height.

"Wish they'd turn on some more lights," Sandy grumbled under his breath. "Then I'd take a chance on a shot through the window."

"Watch it," Ken cautioned a moment later. "Looks like they're getting ready to leave."

Bob Dutton walked to the rear wall and was reaching for the light switches. The overhead light blinked out, leaving only a single small light over the big front doors.

Then, led by the small slender stranger, the group moved toward those doors. When they reached them, the tall heavy-set man opened the small door set into one of the large ones. He stepped out into the night while the rest waited. A moment later he reappeared and nodded, as if reporting that the coast was clear.

While the boys watched they all left, the small slender man in the lead. Jack Dutton departed last, pausing to turn out the final light. The door shut quietly.

"Down," Ken warned.

Footsteps crunched over the gravel and the door of the car near them opened and shut. Its motor came alive and the car backed around, so that for an instant its headlights aimed directly at the oil drums behind which Ken and Sandy crouched breathlessly. Then the car swung to face the street and they were in darkness again.

Ken raised his head cautiously. His hand clutched Sandy's shoulder. "Quick! Now's your chance!"

The car that had been parked beside them had stopped some twenty feet away, its headlights illuminating the area in front of the

garage and outlining Dutton's car there. In front of his car, standing shoulder to shoulder with his sons, Dutton stood directly in the glow of the hard white light.

Sandy's experienced fingers swiftly adjusted the controls of his camera by touch. In a matter of seconds the delicate mechanism was up to his eye. "Couldn't have posed them better if I'd tried," he breathed.

The tiny shutter clicked softly. Sandy wound the film. There was another soft click.

"I wish the other men would turn around," Ken whispered.

The shutter clicked for the third time just as the group broke up.

Sandy let out his breath. "One of those three shots ought to be all right."

The Duttons got into their car and the other two men crossed the street to vanish in the darkness. The convertible whose headlights had proved so useful moved off out of the parking area into the street. For a split second its swinging beams illuminated a heavy sedan parked at the far curb. There was one man at the wheel and another in the rear seat.

"Our two strangers," Ken muttered. "Wonder what they've got to do with this business?"

"I never got a good look at their faces," Sandy said. "Did you?"

"Just one glimpse," Ken said. "Of the small one."

The Dutton car pulled away and a moment later the sedan moved off in the opposite direction. The street was suddenly dark and silent.

"O.K.," Sandy said. He straightened up, easing his cramped muscles. "Let's get back to the darkroom and see what we've got."

"Sure," Ken said absently. "Might as well."

"What's eating you?" Sandy demanded. "A minute ago you nearly jerked my arm off, telling me to take these pictures. Now you sound as if you don't care whether they turn out or not."

"I care all right," Ken assured him. "I was just thinking that if we'd only brought the car along we could be following those two strangers. We didn't even get the license number of that sedan."

"I'm more interested in that man in the convertible," Sandy said, as they walked along the garage wall toward the alley. "I'm always interested in people who seem to be following us-and particularly right now after that old cotter pin turned up."

Ken glanced up and down the alley before they stepped into it. "He may have followed us to the *Advance*," he said, "but somehow I don't believe he followed us over here."

"He turned up mighty suddenly in both places-right after we'd arrived ourselves," Sandy pointed out.

"I know, but-" Ken paused when they reached Main Street too, and

looked both ways before he led the way out of the shadowy passageway alongside the bank. "Let's go through the back door again," he suggested. "I have a hunch the convertible will be out in front."

"Your idea is that he just came over here to report to Dutton?" Sandy asked. And when Ken nodded, he went on, "But if he left the office at all, he won't know whether we're still there or not."

"There could have been two men," Ken pointed out. "One to stay and keep an eye on the office, and one to come over to the garage."

Sandy shook his head. "That would make seven men and three cars all milling around in the middle of the night. And for what? That's what I'd like to know."

A few moments later they crossed the parking lot behind the *Advance* and let themselves in through the rear door. Ken locked it behind them.

"Let's take a look out front," he suggested.

They walked, bent down, through the front office, so that they wouldn't be visible to anyone outside. Together they peered through the glass door.

The convertible was there-in the same place it had been when they first spotted it.

"All right," Sandy said quietly. "Looks like you called this shot correctly. What next? Do we tell Andy Kane?"

"What would we tell him?" Ken asked. "We don't have any real proof that we've been followed. For that matter, do we want him to know we've been spying on Dutton?" He waited a moment. "No," he said, "I think we've got to go it alone until we can deliver some real proof that something is wrong. And maybe that proof is in your camera. Let's get that film developed."

Twenty minutes crawled past before they could lift the small strip of film out of its hypo bath and inspect the three tiny exposures.

Sandy's voice was triumphant. "Perfect-all three of them!"

Ken grinned. "I'll take your word for it. I can't make out a thing on those midgets."

"You'll see," Sandy promised. "I'll have them printed in a few minutes."

By one thirty they were finished. When they went back upstairs Ken had in his pocket four copies of a picture that showed all three Duttons clearly and distinctly. Sandy had enlarged the best negative until the three faces almost filled a post-card-sized print. Every feature was visible, including the daubs of poison ivy salve on Bob Dutton's swollen and puffy face.

"We'll send one off to Global's Sacramento man right away," Ken said.

"Hadn't we better ask Granger for permission first?"

"We'll call him in the morning and tell him what we did," Ken answered. "I don't think he'll mind, but if he does, he can just tell his Sacramento man to pay no attention to our request."

"I'll get the Global directory and find the name and address while you're getting an envelope ready," Sandy offered.

"Hold it!" Ken's exclamation halted the movement of Sandy's hand toward the light switch. Once again he crouched low and made his way toward the front door. "Still there," he reported when he returned.

"I don't need a light to find the directory," Sandy said. "And we can go back downstairs to address the envelope."

Ken used the battered old typewriter in the darkroom to write a brief note to the Sacramento correspondent for Global News. He enclosed a picture with it, sealed both in an envelope, and scrawled air mail in big letters across the front. Then he slipped a carbon copy of his note into another envelope and addressed that one to Granger in New York.

"We'll go out the back way and drop these off at the post office," he said. "They'll be on their way by six."

Sandy yawned and looked at his watch. "That's not so far off," he muttered. "Seems like we never get enough sleep any more."

They checked once more and found the car still parked half a block from the *Advance* office. Then they went out quietly through the rear door and walked briskly through the parking lot to the street behind the office. In less than five minutes they were pushing the two letters through the post-office slot.

"One thing more," Ken said. Sandy groaned but he ignored him. "Let's see if we can't turn the tables on our watchdog-or at least get his license number."

"O.K." Sandy led the way back to South First Avenue, bringing them out on that street at a point half a block behind the car.

"It's still there," he muttered. "But how are we going to get any closer to it without being spotted ourselves? I suppose we can duck in and out of doorways, but-" He broke off and stepped hastily back into the shelter of the alleyway from which he had been about to emerge.

A car was coming toward them, moving slowly down the street in the direction of the parked convertible. When it passed their hiding place they could see that it was a police squad car.

They leaned out cautiously to follow its progress. The police car slowed as it passed the parked vehicle, as if the officers intended to investigate. But it picked up speed again and continued on down the street, turning right at the next corner.

As soon as it swung out of sight, the engine of the parked car

hummed into life. Almost immediately it moved off, traveling without lights. Just before it reached the corner its taillights winked on, but before the boys could identify even the colors of its license plate, it vanished around the turn.

"Scared off," Ken muttered. "And before we could see anything! Just our luck." He stepped out onto the sidewalk. "It might come back, of course."

Sandy yawned. "I'm not going to be here if it does," he announced. "I can't keep my eyes open any longer."

"All right. You win." Ken grinned and added cheerfully, "You'll feel worse in the morning."

His prophecy proved accurate. They were both barely awake enough to eat their breakfast the next day, and not much more alert by the time they entered the office at nine o'clock.

Pop raised his eyebrows. "Well, you finally made it. Lucky for you Friday is a light day around here. Think you'll last it out?"

"What do you mean? I feel fine," Sandy said unconvincingly.

"It's the weather," Ken said, rubbing his eyes.

Pop grunted his disbelief. "Everybody blames everything on the weather." He began to riffle through the early mail delivery and tossed a large envelope to Ken. "Here's something from Global for you."

"Can't be a check." Sandy attempted a grin. "We never got one that needed an envelope that size."

"Looks like a photograph." Ken had slit the envelope and was shaking it. "It is," he added, as a glossy print fell out.

Sandy, suddenly wide awake, was at his side. Together they looked at a head-and-shoulders photograph of a middle-aged man wearing a dark suit and a white shirt. A neatly folded handkerchief poked its corners from his breast pocket. His hair was graying at the temples but his face was smooth and free from wrinkles.

Sandy lifted his eyebrows questioningly but Ken didn't respond. He was unfolding a small note attached to the photograph by a paper clip.

There were just two sentences, written in Granger's illegible scrawl.

"This is Tolliver," the note said. "Figured if you knew what he looked like it would help you to stay clear of him."

The boys looked at each other, but before they could speak, Pop was beside them. "What is it?"

Ken handed him the photograph. "Tolliver," he said.

"The big shot, huh?" Pop looked at the picture and then at the note. "Well," he said, "he certainly hasn't showed up around here and I don't know why he should. It never did make sense to me that a big-

time operator like that would be involved with any smalltown business deal.”

When Pop had returned to his desk Ken motioned to Sandy and led the way downstairs to the darkroom.

“What’s up?” Sandy asked, as Ken shut the door behind them.

“I couldn’t swear to it,” Ken said slowly, “but I think one of those strangers in the garage last night-the small thin one-was Tolliver.”

Sandy whistled softly.

“He’s the one I just got a quick glimpse of,” Ken said, “and then he turned. But I’m pretty sure I’m right.”

Sandy jumped up from the chair he was sitting on.

“Then this is it!” he said excitedly. “This is what we’ve been waiting for. We’ve tied Tolliver to Dutton-and now Andy Kane will have to do some investigating.”

“Will he?” Ken shook his head. “What have we got now that we didn’t have before?”

Sandy’s eyes widened. “But if you saw Tolliver with-“

“I *think* I saw Tolliver with Dutton,” Ken corrected. “That’s not enough evidence for Andy. If it came to a showdown it would be just my word against Dutton’s. I certainly couldn’t get on a witness stand and swear the man I saw was Tolliver. You couldn’t either.”

“I know I couldn’t.” Sandy waited. “Then we have to work on this by ourselves?” he asked slowly.

“Either that or give it up,” Ken said. “But I’m certainly sure enough of what I saw not to want to give it up. And I’m dead sure now that the Connors were the victims of some plot-whether we can ever prove it or not.”

Sandy gulped. “O.K.,” he said. “I agree with you. And I think we’ve got to prove it-or die trying. But how do we begin?”

CHAPTER XIV

LESSON IN LOGIC

“you’re crazy,” Sandy said, leaning across the drugstore counter to reach the mustard. He and Ken had left the office together for an early lunch, in order to have the opportunity to talk in private. “I’m not saying we shouldn’t keep our eyes open for Tolliver, in spite of Granger’s warning. But how can we possibly set out to look for him? Where would we start?”

Ken didn’t answer directly. Instead he said, “I was reading the other day about an archeologist who figured out, using nothing but pure logic, that a certain ancient city must have existed at a certain place on the Mediterranean coast. So he went looking for it. And what do you think happened?”

Sandy glared at him disgustedly over his sandwich. “He found Tolliver, I suppose. And was he sorry!”

“All right,” Ken said. “Don’t listen to me. Remain ignorant all your life.”

“If I remain ignorant about Tolliver’s whereabouts,” Sandy said, “I may at least have a life. Otherwise—” He set down an empty glass. “All right, genius,” he added.

“Go ahead. Explain to me the masterful logic by which you think we can find him.”

“My logic requires certain basic assumptions,” Ken said. “First, that Tolliver is the brains behind all this monkey business.”

“I’ll go along with you that far-temporarily at least,” Sandy agreed.

“Second, that Tolliver-or somebody in his outfit-has been around here for some time,” Ken continued. “The early Conner ‘accidents’ could have been arranged pretty quickly. The cotter pin, the tarpaulin, the brake line could all have been rigged any dark night when the trucks were parked in the garage yard. But the mirror deal needed real planning-probably even needed a rehearsal. So the men who engineered that must have stayed around here for several days at least.”

“What does ‘around here’ mean?” Sandy asked. “That could cover a lot of territory.”

Ken nodded. “I know. But we can start off by eliminating Brentwood itself, I think. Strangers are noticed in this town. So I believe they’d stay somewhere outside, but not so far away that they couldn’t come through regularly to check up on the comings and goings of the Conner trucks.”

“Ten miles in any direction from Brentwood would fill your

requirements,” Sandy said. “And I may be ignorant about archeology, but there’s nothing wrong with my mathematics. That gives us some”- he paused a moment, figuring-“some three hundred square miles. It doesn’t seem to me your logic is narrowing this problem down very rapidly.”

“I’m not finished yet,” Ken said. “We know things about Tolliver that will help us- logically-eliminate most of those three hundred square miles.”

“For example,” he continued, “I think Tolliver would choose a place where frequent arrivals and departures wouldn’t be particularly noticed. That rules out hotels. Bellboys and clerks and elevator operators are too likely to be curious about guests. It’s part of their job to ask if they can give directions, or recommend points of local interest. Tourist courts, on the other hand, don’t usually pay so much attention.”

Sandy grinned. “You’re certainly making headway. I doubt if there are more than a hundred tourist courts in our area. Or,” he added, “does your logic eliminate ninety-nine of them immediately?”

“Almost,” Ken assured him calmly. “Because Tolliver is a big-time operator and therefore probably accustomed to living well. I don’t think he’d stay in a second-rate tourist court. I think he’d choose the best.”

Sandy nodded admiringly. “The old bean is working overtime today, isn’t it? The only difficulty is that the majority of courts around here are fairly good, so-“

“Wait,” Ken interrupted. “My logic offers another limitation too. Most tourist courts are on the big highways. But I think Tolliver would rather get away from well-traveled roads. So my guess is that we should concentrate on those off the beaten track.”

Sandy frowned. “Which means?”

“What about the big one at the south end of Lake Brentwood?” Ken asked. “That’s one of the nicest around here, isn’t it? And secluded too.”

“You’re right,” Sandy said. “I’ve got to admit it. It all fits-unless it’s a collection of wild guesses.”

“The only way to find out is to check,” Ken said. “Do you know who owns that place?”

“It’s one of a national chain,” Sandy told him. “The manager’s name is Rogers, but he’s not a local man. I’ve never even met him. But I suppose we could phone and ask if one of the cabins is in Tolliver’s name.”

“But suppose Tolliver isn’t using his own name? Or suppose one of the men with him signed for the cabin?”

Sandy slumped farther down on the car seat. “I suppose you’re

suggesting that we can only find out by going out there, but I'm not so sure that's smart. Suppose we find him? Then what? What are we going to say?"

"I'm not as much worried about what we'll say as what he'll do," Ken answered. "But I think we ought to be able to do some checking without exposing ourselves."

Sandy was thoughtful for a long moment. "I guess it's worth a try," he said finally. "But what happens next-if we do find him, I mean? Is it your idea that Andy Kane can then be counted on to step in, on the grounds that the notorious Tolliver is hanging around Brentwood?"

Ken hesitated. "I doubt it," he admitted. "Tolliver's never been convicted of anything, so far as we know. I don't suppose the chief would have any excuse to take action."

Sandy picked up the lunch checks with an air of determination. "Well," he said, "we might as well follow this logic of yours to its logical conclusion-and worry about what to do next if and when we find Tolliver."

They were relieved to find Bert alone in the front office. He looked up from his typewriter as they came in.

"You two were smart not to come home for lunch today," he told them.

"Why? What's up?" Sandy asked.

"Mom," Bert answered briefly. "She had another bout with Mort today. Same results as last time-Mort's still going to South America and Mom's mad as a hornet again. And, for some reason, she thinks it's all our fault for not having cleared up the whole mess." Bert jerked a piece of paper from his machine. "What's on your minds?"

"We want to borrow your car for a while," Sandy said.

"Something the matter with yours?" Bert asked.

"No," Ken answered, "except that we think somebody may be keeping an eye on it. And we'd like to make sure nobody follows us this afternoon."

Bert leaned back in his chair. "You're not messing around with Dutton, I hope. Remember-"

"We're not going anywhere near Dutton," Sandy broke in.

Bert studied them for a moment. "Just where are you going?"

The boys looked at each other. Sandy shrugged. "Might as well tell him, I guess."

"We think Tolliver is hanging around here some place," Ken said.

Bert jerked up straight. "Tolliver? The man who tried to buy Mort's business six months ago? The man who-?"

"That's right," Sandy said. "And Ken thinks he saw him with Dutton in the garage last night. Go ahead, Ken. Tell him the whole thing."

“O.K.” Ken sat down on the edge of Bert’s desk.

Five minutes later he stopped talking and Bert stared into space for a moment before he commented. “So the print is already on its way to California, huh?” He didn’t sound too delighted with the idea.

“And Granger said it was O.K. when we phoned him this morning,” Sandy added. “Don’t worry. He says the Global man in Sacramento is discreet. If Dutton is really Dutton he’ll never know anyone was asking about him.”

“I hope so. Anyway,” Bert said, “what’s done is done. As to this trip out to the lake, I don’t think Pop would like the idea of you two making that alone.” He stood up. “So I think I’ll come along.”

Ken and Sandy both grinned at him.

Thirty seconds later they were all in Bert’s car, with Bert at the wheel. He drove aimlessly around Brentwood for some time, until they were sure they weren’t being followed, and then he headed for the lake. At the Brentwood Community Center, on the lake’s northern tip, he swung onto the drive that circled the narrow four-mile-long body of water.

They were almost at the southern end when they got their first glimpse of the handsome Lakeside Court. Bert stopped the car and they walked to the water’s edge for a better look. Almost a thousand feet of water still separated them from the cabins, but even at that distance it was evident that the buildings were the last word in luxury. Each small white clapboard cottage was set in half an acre of landscaped lawn shaded by trees, and each had its own small dock on the lake front.

“Pretty classy,” Sandy murmured. “I wouldn’t mind spending a week here myself-if Tolliver didn’t have the place next door, I mean.”

Back in the car again, Bert said, “Let me go into the office alone to inquire for Tolliver. If he does happen to be registered there, and the manager tells him that three people were asking for him, it would be too easy to identify us. If Tolliver is in on this thing, there’s no use handing him the information that we’re on his tail.”

“That’s a good idea,” Ken agreed. “Here’s Tolliver’s picture to take with you, in case he’s registered by another name.”

“All right,” Bert agreed, and turned off into the white pebble drive that led to the tourist-court office.

There were no cars parked in front of the office and no one was in sight, so the boys didn’t make any effort to conceal themselves when Bert left them to go inside. He was gone three or four minutes.

When he emerged, the manager of the tourist court accompanied him to the door. The boys ducked their heads out of sight but they could hear him say, “Cabin Fifteen is down there to the right, at the far end of the row.”

"Thanks very much," Bert said, and started for the car. As he slid under the wheel he added in a low voice to the boys, "The man in the picture-not known here by name-is 'with Mr. Jackson's party in Cabin Fifteen.' They've been here about two weeks. Stay down there until we get out of sight. I've got to pretend I'm on my way to the cabin. Told the manager I wanted to surprise my old friend, so he wouldn't phone down and announce me."

He was switching on the ignition as he spoke and was about to release the brake when a light delivery truck swept around the coupe's rear end and pulled to a halt beside it.

The driver called, "Hi, Mr. Rogers," to the court manager, still standing in the doorway. "Hope I can repair your set without having to take it down to the shop." Then he glanced into the car next to his and said, "Hello, Bert! Ken-Sandy-is that you? What are you hiding from?" His laugh rang out. "What's the Brentwood *Advance* doing out here, anyway? Giving the Lakeside Courts some free publicity?"

"Just visiting, Gene," Bert growled. He shifted into reverse and backed out, turning into the road that led toward the cottages and the lake. "That tore it," he muttered. "Why did Gene have to turn up right this minute?"

"Was Rogers suspicious before?" Ken asked quietly.

"I don't know. He may have been," Bert admitted. "When he didn't know Tolliver by name, and I dragged out the picture, I had to invent something about my old friend Tolly being pretty important, and often traveling incognito in order to avoid too much attention. Rogers seemed impressed to have such an important guest. I was afraid then that he'd telephone down to the cabin in a few minutes to inquire solicitously if Mr. Tolliver's 'friend' had found him all right."

Bert turned into the driveway of the first cabin he came to, backed out again, and returned the way he had come, this time driving straight on out toward the road. "Now," he said, "Rogers is sure to ask Tolliver about his mysterious 'friends'-and comment on the interesting fact that we're from the Brentwood *Advance* and that two of us were trying to keep out of sight."

"Well, anyway," Sandy said in a subdued voice, straightening up from his cramped position, "we've got to admit that Ken's logic paid off. Tolliver is here. At least we've made some headway."

"It paid off all right," Bert agreed. He shot Ken a wry glance. "It was a nice piece of thinking. And what do we do now?"

"I don't know," Ken admitted. "But it seems to me that if we're right so far, we might risk one more guess. If Tolliver and Dutton are in on something together, and Tolliver is about to learn from Rogers that we've tracked him down, I should think he and Dutton might want to get together to decide what to do about us, if nothing else. If

we could keep an eye on them, we might witness such a conference taking place.”

Bert’s foot shoved the accelerator down a little farther. “And that might convince Mort to hold off on this runaway act of his,” he said firmly. “I think there’s a good chance your logic is right again, Ken. I certainly think we ought to give it a try.”

CHAPTER XV

SPREADING A NET

It was Bert who insisted that they tell Pop the whole story. When they got back to the office Bert told him most of the story, commanding Pop's attention as much by his seriousness as by the incidents he related. And he skillfully sidetracked the anger that showed itself in Pop's voice when the visit to the garage the night before was being described.

"Let's stop worrying about what's already happened," Bert urged, "and go on from here. Personally I'm convinced that Ken and Sandy have turned up some pretty suspicious-looking evidence. And if you agree with me, Pop, maybe you'll also agree to join up. We can't just sit back and pretend that Tolliver's presence in this neighborhood doesn't mean a thing."

Pop was silent for some time. Finally he said, "You're right. We can't. I'm beginning to be interested as a newspaper man, as well as somebody who's concerned for the Conners' future." He turned to the boys. "You got any of those pictures of Dutton left?"

"Sure," Sandy told him.

"Good." Pop reached for the phone. "I'm going to ask Andy to send one of them to the Wide Vista police. I think I can persuade him it will be a wise move, now that Tolliver's turned up."

"Wait a minute, Pop," Ken begged. "If you tell Andy about Tolliver, isn't there a chance he might go see him -to suggest politely that the Brentwood police would like to see him leave the vicinity? I know Andy can't do anything official-there's nothing official against Tolliver. But Andy might think he ought to try to get him out of here, and if Tolliver does leave, we might never find out if there's any connection between him and Dutton."

"You leave it to me," Pop commanded. He got up. "On second thought I won't phone. I'll go see him and take the picture along." He held out his hand and Sandy gave him a print. Pop glanced at it and put it in his pocket. "I think I'll recommend air mail *and* special delivery. There's no use waiting until Tuesday to get an answer on this."

At the door he glanced back. "While I'm gone, why don't you three rig up some kind of program? Among the four of us we ought to be able to keep our eyes on the various suspects for the next day or so, and see whether they do get together or not. You can count on Mom, too," he added. "She'll be at some club meeting in the Oak Room of the Brentwood Inn this afternoon. That's where the Duttons are

staying, isn't it?"

Ken and Sandy and Bert grinned at each other as Pop departed.

"Now we're getting somewhere!" Sandy said.

Ken was already reaching for paper and pencil. "We've got three places to cover," he said. "Tolliver's cabin at the lake, the garage, and the inn."

"I'll take the cabin," Bert said promptly. "Doug Haynes has a little shack right across the lake from the tourist court, and the water's narrow there. With a pair of binoculars I ought to be able to find out who comes and goes from Cabin Fifteen. And Doug even has a phone, so I can report."

"Good," Ken said. "And—"

Sandy interrupted him. "Suppose they hold their conference by phone! Then we wouldn't know a thing about it."

"We'd be out of luck in that case," Ken agreed. "But somehow I doubt if they'd trust the phone in a small town like this where they might be afraid people would listen in on party lines. Anyway, we can't let the possibility stop us from doing what we can. Where's the best place to watch the garage?"

When Pop returned, things were fairly well worked out. They listened to his report before they told him what they had planned.

"Andy's sending the picture out right away with a request for a wired response," Pop told them. "So far as Tolliver is concerned, he's inclined to think the man may just be taking a rich man's vacation. And besides, all Andy's men are doing extra traffic duty over the Fourth-of-July week end. So it's agreeable with him not to do anything about visiting Tolliver, or trying to keep an eye on him—but he won't do anything to prevent us from standing guard, providing we don't stick our necks out and get into trouble."

"Swell!" Bert said. "That's just the way we want it."

Now listen to what we've rigged up." He explained about the Haynes cabin and added that Ken and Sandy were going to watch the garage from Rolfe's accounting office in the bank building. "We didn't tell Rolfe what it was all about," he said.

"That's just as well," Pop agreed. "Though in all the years he's been our accountant there's not much we haven't trusted him with."

"Mom's been alerted to sit beside a window during her club meeting," Bert went on, "and let us know if the Dutton car comes in or out. She's so excited at the idea she wanted to go over to the inn right away, though her meeting doesn't begin until four thirty. But Sandy's already taken a quick walk past the garage and the Duttons are all there now, so we told her four thirty would be time enough."

"The Duttons are watching Fred Ayres and his crew dig the grease pit," Sandy explained, "and Ayres usually quits at four thirty."

“Good.” Pop nodded. “Sounds like you’ve covered everything.”

“Except you,” Bert pointed out. “We’ve decided you ought to stay here in the office, at the phone, so that we can all report in to you and you can pass the information around.”

“You’ve chosen the right man to serve as the nerve center for this delicate operation,” Pop assured them. “All right, men-to your posts!” Then his voice dropped to a level of dead seriousness. “But remember, all of you, the idea is just to watch-not to tangle with Tolliver or anybody who seems to have anything to do with him.”

Five minutes later Ken and Sandy were dragging chairs up to a window in a rear room of Rolfe’s offices. Through the window they could look down on the alley that separated the bank from the garage. And they were high enough to see most of the open space in front of the garage as well as all of the empty parking lot beside it.

“We can’t see inside the garage,” Ken said, “but we’ll certainly know if anybody arrives or leaves.”

When the extension phone in their room rang, Sandy picked it up. “It’s Pop,” he murmured to Ken. “O.K.,” he said. “No-no activity at all here yet.”

“What’s up?” Ken asked as Sandy put down the phone.

“Bert reporting that he’d arrived at the Haynes cabin. He says Tolliver and two other men have come out of the cabin and are sitting on the lawn near the dock, looking as if they didn’t expect to move all afternoon.”

The minutes crawled slowly by. At long last the Town Hall clock chimed four times. Below the boys’ window one of Ayres’ dump trucks emerged from the garage and went off down the street, rumbling under its heavy load of earth. The Dutton car followed it out of the building, but swung abruptly into the empty lot. Jack Dutton got out from behind the wheel and went back inside the garage.

At ten past four Mom called. “Are you sure those men are still in the garage?” she asked. “I’m sitting here on pins and needles. I could just as well go down to the inn right this minute and-“

“Take it easy, Mom,” Sandy told her. “They’re here all right-and showing no signs of leaving yet.”

“Well, all right,” Mom said. “I’ll wait another ten minutes then. And I’ll phone you when I get to the inn.”

It was less than twenty minutes later when she phoned again. “I’m at the inn,” she reported in a low conspiratorial voice. “I can see the whole parking lot from my seat. You did say the Duttons were driving a gray coupe with Florida plates, didn’t you?”

“That’s right, Mom,” Ken told her. “But they’re still here at the garage.”

“Well, I’ll be watching for them,” Mom promised. “There’s a phone

here in this room-Extension 21-and I can reach it from where I sit. So you might call me when they leave the garage."

"All right. We will."

"There goes another load of dirt," Sandy reported from the window as Ken put down the phone.

At a few minutes after four thirty Fred Ayres came out of the garage with three of his men. Dutton was with him. They talked for a moment and then Ayres left in a light truck, taking his workmen with him. Dutton went back into the garage.

"It's been nearly two hours now," Sandy muttered, "and still no sign of Dutton and Tolliver getting together. Maybe we're barking up the wrong tree."

"I think it's too early to start worrying," Ken said. "It's natural for them to have waited until Ayres cleared out. Maybe they'll even wait until dark. But I still think they're likely to get together. Dutton knows we know something about Tolliver because we mentioned the name in front of him. And Tolliver must have heard by now that we were asking for him. They're certainly smart enough to put those two facts together, aren't they?"

"I guess so," Sandy agreed. "On the other hand--"

He broke off abruptly and they both leaned forward. Jack Dutton had just emerged from the garage and was getting into the gray coupe.

Ken reached for the phone.

"Hold it," Sandy told him. "He's just driving into the garage."

"We'd better tell Pop, anyway," Ken said. "It may mean they're getting ready to leave."

When he had reported to Pop he listened for a few minutes, and before he hung up, he said, "Great, Pop. That's better than one of us doing it in our car." He put down the receiver and turned to Sandy. "Pop's going to drive slowly past the garage pretty soon and park somewhere near by if the Duttons haven't left yet. He'll follow them when they do, just in case they don't go back to the hotel or out to the lake."

The Dutton coupe finally left the garage a few minutes after five. It stopped just in front of the building, and Jack Dutton got out and went back to the garage.

Ken craned his neck. "Can't see what he's doing. Probably just locking up."

A moment later Jack came out, got into the car again, and drove off in the direction of the hotel. While Ken was still dialing the inn number, Pop's car appeared, moving slowly down the street after the gray coupe.

"Mrs. Allen, please," Ken said into the mouthpiece. "Extension 21."

... Wish we could have seen through the roof of that car,” he muttered to Sandy as he waited, “and made sure all three Duttons were in-Mom? ... Ken. They’re on their way, with Pop after them. We’ll stay here until one of you reports.”

“Ken!” Sandy said excitedly, just as he hung up. Ken swung quickly toward the window. “Look,” Sandy hurried on. “That’s Bob Dutton standing on the curb. He just came out of the garage and he’s looking down the street. Do you suppose he saw Pop and guesses that something’s up?”

“Could be,” Ken agreed uneasily. “Or maybe-There, he’s going back into the garage. Maybe he was just trying to catch his brother’s car, to tell him something. Wonder if Papa Dutton is with him or in the car.”

They learned the answer several minutes later when Mom called to report in a whisper that the Dutton car had just driven into the inn parking lot, and that Dutton and the young man who was driving got out and entered the inn through an entrance directly beneath her window.

“Pop’s car came into the lot after they’d disappeared,” she said.

“O.K., Mom. He’ll probably call us too.”

The phone rang again almost as soon as Ken hung up. It was Pop, speaking from a booth in the lobby of the inn.

“Only Dutton and one son here,” he reported briefly. “Both got their keys and went upstairs.”

“We know.” Ken told him about Bob remaining at the garage. “He may have seen your car,” he added.

Pop didn’t reply for a moment. Then he said, “Well, probably no harm done if he did. After all, I do drive around this town every day. I’ll stay on here at the inn and relieve Mom now,” he went on. “Did Rolfe say you two could stay on at his office even when he closes up?”

“Yes,” Ken assured him. “Bert arranged for that.”

Sandy spoke up from the window. “Bob Dutton’s leaving the garage now. On foot. Walking toward the inn.”

Ken repeated the news to Pop, who promised to watch out for the third member of the Dutton family. He also said he’d call Bert to report the latest developments.

“If you don’t hear from me again,” Pop concluded, “you’ll know there’s nothing new at the lake yet.”

The next forty-five minutes passed slowly in the small room back of the accounting office. At the end of that time Mom arrived with a large paper bag full of sandwiches and two containers of milk.

“Pop had a bite in the lunchroom overlooking the lobby,” she said. “But poor Bert is still hungry.”

Sandy grinned reassuringly at her. “Don’t worry, Mom. There’s

probably something in the Haynes pantry -and Bert wouldn't be shy about borrowing it in an emergency."

The phone shrilled loudly. Ken grabbed it. "Yes," he said, "Mom just came in. ... They did? Good. Then probably nothing much will happen for the next hour or so." He hung up. "Pop says all three Duttons just went into the inn restaurant," he reported.

Mom left reluctantly at seven. "Be careful," she warned them, as Ken went to the door with her to let her out of the now deserted office. "I'll stay close to the phone at home. Call me if there's anything I can do."

Another half hour went by. The sun had already dropped behind the buildings to the west and the dusky air had a faint coolness. The boys sat close to the window to catch what breeze was stirring.

The phone rang just as the town clock struck eight.

"Pop here," the hurried voice in the receiver said. "They're on their way out of the dining room, so I ducked into this phone booth. If they go off in their car I'll follow them... . They're crossing the lobby now. Don't know whether they're heading back to their room or-They've stopped at the desk to talk to the clerk."

He paused, waiting. Then Ken, on the other end of the wire, could hear Pop's sudden sharp intake of breath.

"Well, I'll be homswoggled! Looks like you hit it on the nose, Ken!" Pop's low voice barely carried over the wire, but Ken could hear the excitement in it. "They asked the clerk a question," Pop said, "and he turned around to that map mounted up behind the desk to give them some directions. Even from here I can see what he's pointing to-the far end of the lake where the tourist court is! They're leaving now. I'll stick with them." The phone went abruptly dead, and Ken knew that Pop was hurrying out through the back door of the inn to the parking lot and his car.

Ken dropped the receiver. "Let's go," he said. "They're on their way to the lake."

CHAPTER XVI

A SURPRISING CATCH

Five minutes later the boys were in their convertible and driving rapidly out of town.

"When we get out to the lake," Ken said, "we'll follow the shore road along the opposite side from the tourist court and pick up Bert. We can go in his car from there. It won't be as noticeable as ours. We can't tell how closely Pop will be able to follow them, but with any luck, we ought to be able to reach Cabin Fifteen by the time the Duttons get there. They don't know the road and won't be able to make the time we can."

Sandy nodded, his foot hard on the accelerator. "We'd better not turn in the tourist-court driveway at all. We can go on past to some spot down the road, park there, and walk through the woods toward the shore. We ought to be able to figure closely enough to come out pretty near the cabin."

"Right," Ken agreed. He couldn't keep the note of triumph out of his voice. It was a good feeling to know that it was his logic-his ideas-that were apparently leading them straight toward a solution of the Conners' problem. He wished there had been time to phone Mom and assure her that things were working out just as they had all hoped.

There was a lot of traffic on the road-people heading out of town for the long holiday week end, or simply driving around to enjoy the coolness of the evening air. Sandy dodged in and out of the right-hand lane and left the highway at the first opportunity, making good use of his knowledge of the lesser roads to get them to the lake as quickly as possible. In a matter of minutes they swung into the lake drive, taking the right-hand turn past the community center. There was no way of knowing whether the Duttons, with Pop in their wake, had already reached that point and turned left toward the tourist court.

And then they were piling out of their car at the Haynes cottage and pounding around the house to the porch overlooking the lake. Bert had heard them coming and met them halfway.

"Nothing doing at Cabin Fifteen," he began. "What-?"

"Come on." Ken grabbed his arm and dragged him toward his own car, explaining as they ran.

Bert grasped the situation quickly. "I'll drive."

Less than three minutes later Bert pulled his car off the road at a point some quarter of a mile past the driveway leading to the office of the tourist court. "Cabin Fifteen ought to be right straight through the woods here," he said.

Bert used his flash for the first few hundred feet of their journey through the heavy underbrush. Then he turned it off.

"We'll have to be careful from here on in," he said.

They moved in single file with Bert in the lead. Soon they could see the lights of the row of cabins up ahead of them, winking through the trees. Bert took his sights on the lights farthest to the right—the lights of Cabin Fifteen, at the end of the row. Not until he got within a hundred yards of it did he swerve still farther to the right, so that they could come out on the sandy shore beyond the cottage itself.

When he reached the beach he waited for Ken and Sandy to join him.

There was a light in one of the rear rooms of the cottage, and its wide screened porch, raised several feet above the ground and fronting on the lake, was brilliantly illuminated. Bert jerked his head toward it and the boys nodded. Even at that distance, and over the faint noises of rustling leaves and softly lapping waves, they could hear unintelligible fragments of voices on the porch.

Bert pulled their heads close to his and spoke in a faint whisper. "I'll go around to the rear and come along the far side of the house toward the front. You take this side. On my way past the cabin driveway I'll try to see if the Dutton car has arrived yet. If it has, I'll keep an eye out for Pop. See you here or at the car later, whenever we're sure we've got what we came for."

The boys nodded. Bert dropped to a low crouch, so that his head was level with the top of the undergrowth, and started forward. It was a moonless night. Thirty seconds after he had left them they could neither see nor hear him.

They waited for what was perhaps half a minute and then they too started forward. Halfway to the cottage they froze where they were. A beam of white headlights had suddenly appeared, striking brilliantly against the cottage's rear wall. The lights swerved, came to a stop beneath the cottage windows, and then flicked off.

"Guess this is the right place." The voice was unmistakably Dutton's, and the answer came in Bob Dutton's surly tones. "Looks like it, Dad."

A moment later there was a knock at the cottage door. The door opened, throwing a rectangle of yellow light out onto the driveway, and the Duttons went inside. The door closed again.

Ken wondered whether Pop was behind them. He had heard no second car, but Pop would certainly not have dared to drive close to the cottage. He wondered, too, how Bert had managed to conceal himself from the car's swerving lights. But he determinedly put everything else out of his mind except the difficult business of creeping up to the house. Sandy moved soundlessly behind him.

At the corner of the cottage Ken turned toward the water. Already he could hear occasional isolated words out of the meaningless jumble of voices on the porch, but it wasn't until he reached the corner of the porch itself that he made out a single distinct sentence. A clear businesslike voice was asking a question.

"Well, what about it, Dutton?" it said. "Have you considered the proposition I made to you last night?"

"Yes, I've considered it very carefully, Mr. Tolliver," Dutton answered. "And I want you to know that I realize what a generous offer it is."

"Good." Tolliver sounded pleased. "Then you're ready to accept?"

"Sure they are, boss," a strange voice put in. "How could they refuse?"

"Well—" Dutton hesitated. "No, Mr. Tolliver. I can't say that I am."

Ken felt a prickling of uneasiness. He pressed his ear closely against the latticework that enclosed the space beneath the porch, and held his breath. The conversation inside had not begun the way he had expected it to.

"You see," Dutton went on, speaking slowly and carefully, "this is exactly the kind of business I've been looking for, and now that I've found it, I don't know that I want to sell."

"Not even for twice the price you paid for it?" Tolliver asked. "You'd be making a nice profit—a clear hundred per cent."

"That's a lot of money, of course," Dutton said thoughtfully.

"It certainly is. Isn't it, boys?" Tolliver apparently directed his question to the two younger Duttons.

"It's no more than it's worth," Bob Dutton said.

"My brother's right, Mr. Tolliver," Jack added. "We'd never have bought it so cheap if we hadn't been right on the spot."

"That's where I fell down, of course," Tolliver admitted. "I'd made an offer for the place some months ago. I like the location and everything else about it. I'd have snapped it up the minute I knew it was for sale—if only I'd heard about it in time. But I didn't, and that's why I'm forced to offer double now. What do you say? Will you sell?"

"I'd be willing, Mr. Tolliver, but my father seems to like the place." That was Jack Dutton again.

"That's it," Dutton said. "I just like it. I'm satisfied with our bargain, and willing to settle down here. Brentwood's a nice town and everybody's been mighty friendly."

"Well—" Now it was Tolliver who hesitated. "I guess there's nothing more to be said, in that case. But I wish you'd think it over a little longer. I'll give you until Tuesday to make up your mind. After that, if you're still determined to keep the place, I guess I'll just have to look elsewhere."

Ken and Sandy heard the Duttons getting to their feet, and heard their footsteps moving across the porch. There was a murmur of good-byes, and a final remark from Tolliver to the effect that he hoped they would change their minds.

And then the back door opened and shut, and a moment later a car motor started up. The boys waited until the Duttons had backed out of the driveway and started up the road before they risked slipping back to the edge of the woods where they had separated from Bert. There, just inside the shadow of the trees, they stood in puzzled silence for some moments.

Suddenly Bert emerged from the darkness just beside them.

"Pop's O.K.," he breathed. "He's already started for his car. Come on. We'll meet him at the office."

None of them attempted to speak further until they were in Bert's car and heading back toward town.

"All right," Ken said then. "Say what you're thinking."

"I'm too confused to know what I think," Sandy muttered.

Ken tried to grin at him. "You're certainly not too confused to know what you think of my great ideas-my magnificent display of logic." He groaned. "Boy! If ever I had anything backfire on me-I"

"You're not the only one," Bert told him gruffly. "We all agreed with you."

"Only after I worked my head off to convince you," Ken insisted. He couldn't say any more for a moment. He was too angry with himself, and too disappointed over the failure of what had seemed to him a sure-fire plan.

"Well," Bert said finally, "at least we were all just as surprised as you were-to hear Tolliver and Dutton calmly discussing the sale of the business. For a while I thought I just couldn't be hearing correctly."

"Me too," Sandy confessed. "I thought something must be the matter with me. Of course," he added, "we still don't know why Tolliver wants the garage so badly. Maybe-"

"Don't even talk about him any more," Bert begged. "When I think that the Connors could have got double the price, if Tolliver had only heard about it in time-!" He hit the steering wheel with his fist, as an outlet for his anger.

"I can't understand why he didn't hear about it," Ken said. "Especially if he was right out here at the tourist court. Why hadn't he left his address with the broker, so he'd be in a position to hear if the place came up for sale?"

Bert shrugged. "Questions like that don't do us much good any more," he said. "Dutton's apparently just what he appears to be. Tolliver may have decided to go straight and get into a decent business. There's apparently nothing phony about any part of the

setup.”

“Then you think,” Ken said, “that the Conners’ accidents were really accidents—that we’ve been mistaken all along?”

Bert didn’t answer for a moment. Then he said, “It looks like it. All we’ve accomplished with our suspicions and our farfetched ideas is to get our hopes up.”

Ken clenched his jaws tightly together. He knew Bert was trying to be kind, trying to pretend that all of them, rather than just Ken, had pushed forward an investigation which now appeared to have been utterly useless.

“I’m the only one really to blame,” Ken said quietly.

“Oh, cut it out!” Sandy told him roughly. He turned sideways on the seat so that he could fling an arm over Ken’s shoulders. “We were all in on it. And besides, we haven’t done any harm. The Conners aren’t any worse off now than they were the night of the accident.”

Suddenly there rose in Ken’s mind a picture of the brilliant oncoming headlights which Sandy had produced with the mirror the night before. He opened his mouth to say “Was Ralph’s crash on Sugarloaf Hill a real accident too? And if it was, what became of the car that drove him off the road?” But he didn’t ask the questions out loud. He knew Bert and Sandy would now have only one answer for him—that the accident must have been a real one, even if nobody ever learned what had become of the car that so mysteriously disappeared.

He didn’t speak at all until they reached the office, and neither did Sandy or Bert.

Pop’s car was already in the *Advance* parking lot. When Bert saw it he said, “Why don’t you two take your car and go on home? I’ll check in with Pop. It’s getting late, and anyway, there’s no real reason for us to sit up hashing this thing over half the night.”

“All right,” Ken said quietly.

“That’s a good idea,” Sandy said with false enthusiasm. “Now that I think of it I could sleep for a week, beginning right now.”

Mom was apparently already asleep in the dark quiet house when they got home. Ken and Sandy didn’t even stop in the kitchen for their usual evening snack. They went silently up the stairs, without a word, and got into bed. Sandy fell asleep immediately—or, at any rate, pretended to fall asleep. But Ken lay staring into the dark for a long time, his thoughts whirling in crazy hopeless circles.

CHAPTER XVII

INVITATION BY FORCE

The next morning all the Allens were determinedly cheerful. Ken realized that Mom must have received a phone call from Pop the night before, warning her not to question the boys when they got in. He had wondered why she hadn't been waiting up for them. Now he understood. It was all part of the Allens' kindly conspiracy not to make Ken feel worse than he did for having roused their hopes.

Once during breakfast Ken started to ask Pop if he had informed Andy Kane about the failure of the previous evening's investigation, but he restrained himself. If the Allens didn't want to talk about the affair, he didn't want to force them.

As soon as breakfast was over, Pop announced that there was work to do, whether it was Saturday or not. "The county 4-H camp is opening today and I want a full story on it," he said. "Give me at least two columns, Ken-and I'll be able to use several pictures, Sandy." He grinned at them. "When you're finished you can take the rest of the day off."

"Gee, Pop, thanks!" Sandy said with a pretense of grateful humility. "You mean even if we finish as early as five o'clock?"

"Go on," Pop said. "Get out of here, both of you."

It wasn't quite five o'clock when they finished, but it was well past three. Ken and Sandy, who had confined their conversation all day to the work at hand, drove out to the lake for a swim, still avoiding any mention of the Connors or Dutton and Tolliver. After supper they went to the movies and turned in early. Again Sandy appeared to fall asleep immediately, and again Ken lay wide awake in the dark for a long time.

Sunday was a painful repetition of Saturday. A mid-afternoon thunderstorm did break the week-long heat wave, but nothing occurred to lift the gloom that hung over the Allen household. Ken knew all the Allens were -like himself-grimly aware that every tick of the clock brought Mort closer to signing that South American contract.

That night in bed Ken went over again all the things that still seemed to him unexplained and unexplainable: Ralph's mysterious crash, the old cotter pin in the wheel of their own convertible, Tolliver's presence at the tourist court and his failure to buy the garage when it became available... . The list seemed endless, and the more he went over it the more certain he became that something was wrong somewhere. When he finally fell asleep he had determined to discuss the whole matter all over again the next day, at least with

Sandy.

But when they all came down to breakfast the next morning-Monday, the Fourth of July-Pop took command of the conversation to issue his orders for the day.

"Sandy and Ken," he began, "you two will cover the parade. Get down to the starting point at Town Hall right after breakfast and check over all your data on the floats and the various groups of marchers as they collect there. Photograph every one of the floats, Sandy. I'll use as many pictures as I've got room for.

"And, Ken," he continued, "you keep your eyes open for human-interest stuff. Lost children, minor accidents -you know the kind of thing. If the Queen of the May drops her crown in the middle of Main Street, I want that in your story. Got it?"

The boys nodded. "O.K.," Pop said. "The parade officially begins at ten. You two cover it until it gets to the edge of town. Bert and I will be out at the lake early to meet the cavalcade when it arrives there. We'll cover the picnic at noon, and Bert's taking care of the speeches afterward. I don't care what you two are doing then, but I want you on hand for the judging of the floats and that's scheduled for"-Pop glanced down at his notes- "for two o'clock. I'll want specially posed pictures of all the prize winners, Sandy. And, Ken, I want you to interview the winners. Is that all clear?"

The boys nodded once more. "Then finish your breakfast and get started," Pop ordered.

The wide avenue in front of the Town Hall, half a block off Main Street, was jammed when Ken and Sandy arrived there. They spent a grim hour tracking down the various float chairmen for last-minute checks on the parade order and on the persons taking part in the tableaux atop the floats. They were exhausted and relieved when the parade finally got underway at only a few minutes after ten o'clock.

"Whew!" Sandy gasped. "And the worst is yet to come!" He grabbed Ken's arm. "Let's get down to the corner of Main and Spruce. That ought to be a good spot-gives them three blocks to get straightened out in."

Together they tore around the corner into Main Street and dashed toward Spruce, the cross street just beyond the bank building. Sandy shoved his way through to the front of the crowd massed on the sidewalk, and Ken followed. A cheerful roar went up from the spectators as the high school band came into view. The drum majorettes in the lead won the first round of applause.

Sandy rapidly shot one display after another, as they moved past. Ken kept watch for the human-interest bits that Pop had particularly asked for. He saw a small child squirm from its mother's grasp and run into the street to clutch at the paper streamers flying from the 4-H

float. He saw a mongrel dog barking happily in the wake of the S.P.C.A. exhibit. Quickly he jotted down notes on both those incidents.

The parade moved with a kind of majestic slowness. Not until close to ten thirty could Ken look back up the street and see the final float—an elaborate construction prepared by the Chamber of Commerce—turn into Main Street. As if in salute a loud firecracker exploded at that very instant not far from where the boys stood.

Ken looked around sharply. Even Sandy spared an eye from his camera for a curious glance. “Andy Kane must have slipped up,” he muttered as he clicked his shutter. “Firecrackers have been illegal in town for years.” Then he grinned. “But every year or so somebody smuggles a few in. Will Andy be sore!”

Ken looked around for the person who had set off the noisemaker, but gave it up finally. He had almost forgotten it, when suddenly, five minutes later, another firecracker exploded with an earth-shaking noise. Almost immediately afterward other crackers burst—half a dozen at a time, their sounds overlapping in a thundering chorus.

Ken swung around. The sounds had come from the block just behind him—from somewhere down near the bank, he thought.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang-bang-bang! The noise went on. Women and children in the crowd screamed, half in pleasure and half in fright. Men grinned.

Ken backed away from the curb, eased himself out of the worst of the crowd, and then peered down toward the bank. What he saw there made him shout to Sandy to join him.

After a moment Sandy shoved through the crowd to his side. “What’s up?” he demanded. “I’ve got to get back there and—”

“Look,” Ken said. “Down there near the entrance to the bank. Isn’t that Terry Tuthill with that bunch of two-inch salutes in his hand?”

Sandy squinted and then caught his breath. Ten-year-old Terry was the youngest newsboy on the *Advance*. His father was well known as the strictest disciplinarian in Brentwood.

“Come on,” Sandy said. “I’ll have to get the rest of the pictures later. We’ve got to take those things away from Terry before his father sees them.”

Together they sprinted the few hundred feet to the spot where the boy stood. Young Terry’s eyes were shining and he was pulling a handful of matches out of his pocket.

“Hey, Terry!” Sandy grabbed the hand that held the firecrackers. “Where’d you get those and what do you think you’re doing with them? Do you want to get in trouble with your father and Chief Kane both?”

Terry blinked. “The man said it was all right. He said if I set them off at exactly ten thirty nobody would scold me. He told the other kids

the same thing. I did try one a little early but-“

“What other kids?” Sandy asked.

Ken’s question overlapped his. “What man?”

“A lot of others,” Terry said. “Some of them are across the street, I guess.” Then he looked at Ken. “I don’t know who the man was. Why should I care-as long as he gave me these?”

“What was this about setting them off at exactly ten thirty?” Ken wanted to know.

Terry shrugged. “That’s what he said. He-” Suddenly he pointed. “There he is! Maybe he’s coming to give me more.”

Ken and Sandy both looked in the direction the boy was pointing. A slender man with his hat pulled down over his eyes was coming along Main Street. But as Ken started toward him, he turned to his left sharply and disappeared into the narrow passageway that ran alongside the bank to the alley behind it.

Ken’s heart jumped.

He grabbed Sandy’s camera out of his hands and thrust it at Terry. “Take this to the *Advance* office for us.” Even as he spoke he was pulling Sandy forward.

“What’s the idea?” Sandy yelled. “What’re you-?”

“I don’t know,” Ken said grimly, “but I think we ought to find out. That man is the one who was in the convertible parked near the office the other night-the same one who came to the garage while we were looking through the windows.”

Ken reached the passageway in a dozen long strides. There he stopped, stood close to the bank, and peered around the corner. The narrow passageway was empty.

“Hurry up!” Still clutching Sandy’s arm Ken hurled himself around the corner and started down the close-walled walk that led to the alley between the bank and the garage. At the entrance to the alley he stopped again, peering once more around the corner. The alley too was deserted.

“Maybe we can catch him on North First Street,” Ken said, half to himself.

Sandy demanded, “What is all this?” But he was hurrying along beside Ken as he spoke, across the alley and toward North First Street through the empty parking lot alongside the garage.

Ken turned toward him to answer and then stopped at the sound of a door banging shut not far away.

“That was the front door of the garage,” Ken said in a low voice. “Not one of the big doors-the little one set into them.”

He swerved abruptly to the right, making for the window through which they had peered several nights before. By the time Sandy reached his side he had turned away.

“No use,” Ken said shortly. “They’ve got the inside smeared up with soap or something. Let’s try the glass panes in the front doors.”

“Now wait a minute!” Sandy hauled him back as he started forward. “If you’re going to be arrested as a Peeping Tom I don’t mind being arrested with you-if I know what it’s all about. Or have you just gone crazy?”

“Probably,” Ken said. “But I think that man went in the garage and I’d like to know why. I’d also like to know why he distributed firecrackers that had to be set off at exactly ten thirty. The only way I can think of to find the answers to those questions is to get a look inside the garage.” He jerked out of Sandy’s grasp and ran toward the front of the garage.

Sandy, still making protesting noises, was beside him by the time he rounded the corner.

Ken was peering up at the small glass panes which formed the upper half of the big doors.

“They’ve got these smeared up too-they sure must want privacy.” Ken’s voice was barely above a whisper. “But it looks like there’s a spot they missed in the top pane over there-see? Give me a boost up so I can-“

The click of a latch directly in front of them interrupted his hurried words. An instant later the small door opened inward. Framed in the aperture was Randolph Dutton, his small figure-usually so well-groomed- dressed in mud-streaked overalls.

His face was blandly courteous but his voice had an edge. He looked from Ken to Sandy and then back to Ken before he spoke. “Was it you trying to look through one of my side windows a moment ago?”

Ken swallowed but he tried to make his own voice casual. “That’s right,” he said. “I didn’t know whether you were inside or not and-“

Dutton gestured him to silence with a grimy hand.

“Am I to understand that you were peering through the window in the hope that I was *not* inside?”

“No,” Ken said. “I didn’t know whether you were or not and-“

“So you said before,” Dutton interrupted. “Perhaps you mean that you wanted to discover whether I was here, and that you chose this method of finding out. If you had knocked on the door, it would have been simpler, don’t you think? And perhaps more courteous?”

Ken had been gathering his thoughts. This time he talked determinedly. “We saw a man who had been handing out firecrackers to kids over on Main Street, Mr. Dutton. That’s illegal in Brentwood and we followed him-but we lost him somewhere around here. I thought maybe he’d taken cover in your garage-that he might have broken in, thinking the place would be deserted on a holiday.”

Sandy unexpectedly backed him up. “That’s the way it was, Mr.

Dutton. We didn't have any way of knowing you'd be here yourself on the Fourth of July, so we thought we'd better check up and see if everything was O.K."

"I see." Dutton smiled suddenly and his bright eyes twinkled. "That was neighborly of you-very! I know you've always been friends of the Conners, and it makes me feel good to think you're carrying your sense of friendship over to the new owner of their garage. I don't think I can be harboring a fugitive from the anti-fireworks law without knowing it, but if you'd like to come inside for a moment to check up for yourselves, I'd be glad to have you."

Ken hesitated. He still wanted to see the inside of the garage-to find out what was going on that had made it necessary to whiten the windows so that they were no longer transparent. But he told himself that the suspicions in his own mind couldn't possibly be correct, and that if they were, he certainly had no right to involve Sandy in what would be a very dangerous situation.

"Thanks, Mr. Dutton," he said. "As long as you say everything is all right, we certainly don't want to take up your time."

"Of course not," Sandy said. "It was just because we heard your door slam a few minutes ago that--"

"You heard it?" Dutton's voice had turned hard and the twinkle was gone from his eyes.

"Well, we thought we did," Sandy said. Ken could hear the uneasiness in his words. "Of course we know this place pretty well-all the noises and all-so we naturally-" He cleared his throat. "But we'd better be getting back to the parade now. We're covering it for Pop and--"

"Just a minute!" Dutton had stepped backward until he was two feet inside the doorway, invisible to anyone outside the garage except the two boys standing directly before him. "You should have kept your eyes on the parade in the first place, if that was your job. Now I'm afraid you'll have to disappoint your readers for once. I think you'd better come inside after all. In fact, I urge you to!"

There was a smile on his face below the cold narrowed eyes. And there was a gun in his hand, its muzzle pointed toward them.

CHAPTER XVIII

GAS!

The boys stared, hypnotized by the deadly weapon that swung in a slow arc, pointing first at Ken and then at Sandy and then back again.

"Inside!" Dutton repeated.

"You can't-I"

"Yes, I can!" Dutton snapped at Ken. "And I will-in three seconds-if you don't start moving."

Ken took a step then and Sandy followed him. Step by step they went forward until they crossed the threshold, while Dutton retreated before them.

"Shut the door," the man ordered.

Sandy reached back without looking around, groped until his fingers found the door, and pushed. It closed with a sharp final bang.

"And now march down to the back of the garage," Dutton said, stepping aside and motioning them past him. They could hear his footsteps behind them. "Kennedy!" Dutton called out as he walked. "Come on out of there-there's no need to hide now."

Ken was abreast of the light delivery truck when its back door swung open and the man they had seen on the street-the man who had given firecrackers to Terry Tuthill-jumped out. His small dark eyes flashed angrily at the boys.

"You two snoopers stuck your necks out too far this time!" he said.

Dutton snapped at him. "You shut up! If you'd been more careful they wouldn't have seen you."

"I'm not invisible," Kennedy began defensively. "I-"

Dutton cut him off. "Never mind explaining yourself now. Get down there and see how they're coming. And hurry up!"

"O.K." Kennedy went forward to where piled earth rimmed the excavation for the inspection pit. He climbed over the heap, slid down the other side, and dropped out of sight.

Ken knew in that instant that his own wild suspicion, which had seemed so farfetched and incredible only a few moments before, was actually correct. In spite of himself, he spoke his conviction aloud.

"So that is what you're doing!" he said. "You're tunneling into the bank vault!"

Dutton came around, so that they could see his face and smiled deliberately into Ken's startled eyes. "Fortunately for me," he said, "you're not quite as smart as you think you are, or you might have figured that out a little earlier. And in that case you might have messed up the best bank job of my career. But, as I said, you're not

quite that smart, so there's no harm done. It's too late for you to make trouble for me now."

Ken fought down a rising sense of panic, and the despairing realization that it was too late-too late to stop this daring robbery and perhaps even too late to save themselves. Dutton had been clever enough to have firecrackers exploded at the very moment he was blasting through into the bank's underground vault. He would also be clever enough to know that two shots from his revolver-one for Sandy and one for Ken-probably would be mistaken for two more firecrackers. If anyone heard the shots at all, Ken added to himself.

But Dutton's next words unexpectedly suggested that Ken's alarm for Sandy and himself was unnecessary-that Dutton had no intention of killing them after all.

"You'll be able to tell your grandchildren," Dutton said, "that you had an inside view of one of the slickest jobs in the annals of crime. You can also tell them, from me, that crime does pay-and mighty well."

Ken found his voice. "How can you be sure?" he asked. "You may not even get outside of Brentwood before--"

Dutton's laugh cut him off. "I'm sure, all right. I don't leave things to chance. Nobody will even know I knocked off the bank until the place opens for business tomorrow morning. And by then I'll be a long way from here-with a couple of suitcases full of pretty green-and-white souvenirs."

"You mean," Sandy asked, "that you bought the garage just in order to pull this job?"

He had spoken in a hoarse croak, as if his voice had not been used in years. Ken flashed him a worried glance, but what he saw reassured him. Sandy wasn't frightened. He, too, seemed to realize that Dutton apparently had no intention of harming them. Sandy had pulled himself together and-like Ken-seemed determined only to learn all that could be learned about Dutton's careful scheme.

Dutton laughed. "Don't you think that was reason enough? Believe me, it was a small investment, considering the return I expect to get out of it."

"And I suppose," Ken said, "you also expect the job to repay you for the months you spent forcing the Connors to sell."

Dutton shot him a glance that was part anger, part unwilling admiration. "I thought maybe you'd figured out those 'accidents,'" he said.

"Was that why you replaced the cotter pin in our car wheel with one that was ready to break through?" Sandy asked.

"No reason why I shouldn't tell you," Dutton said. "Sure-that was why. I thought maybe if you had a little 'accident' yourselves, you'd

be out of my way for the short while I expected to be in town.”

“It might have put us ‘out of the way’ permanently,” Ken said.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Dutton said. “It probably wouldn’t have been much of an accident. Might have laid you up for a few days—that’s all. And that’s all I needed.”

Ken clamped his lips shut firmly in order not to speak the thought that was in his mind—that Dutton had certainly been taking a long chance. No accident could be certain not to result in death. But if Dutton was planning to spare their lives now, there was no point in angering him and perhaps changing his mind.

And then suddenly it occurred to Ken what a chance

Dutton was taking with his bank-robbery job. “What about the tunnel?” he asked, nodding toward the excavation. “Won’t the police know who robbed the bank?”

Dutton stared at him and then laughed. “Bless my soul!” he said. “And I thought you were smart! Why, of course, the police will know that the new owner of the Conner garage is the man they want. I expect them to be looking for me by about—let’s say—ten minutes after nine tomorrow morning. That’s why I’m not worried about what you two know. You won’t be able to tell the police a thing they can’t find out for themselves.”

“But then—” Sandy began.

“But then,” Dutton broke in mockingly, “they’ll have to catch me. And that’s where they’ll run into trouble. They’ve tried it before and they’ve never succeeded yet. Don’t you worry about me. I’m an expert at eluding cops.”

“You chose a good name as a disguise this time,” Ken said. The note of respect he put into his voice wasn’t entirely false. With every moment he was becoming more aware of Dutton’s power as an adversary.

“Didn’t I?” Dutton beamed, as if their conversation were a perfectly ordinary one, and Ken had just congratulated him on a successful stroke of legitimate business. “Yes,” Dutton went on, “Randolph Dutton of Wide Vista is a fine old gentleman. I knew his reputation would be very useful to me if any busybodies—like you two foolish youngsters—wanted to check up on me. And those two fine sons of his made a successful cover for the two assistants I needed for this job.” He nodded with satisfaction. “Yes, if I do say it myself, I believe this job will go down in history.”

He glanced at his watch and muttered, “Eleven five I What’s keeping that fellow? I told him to hurry. We want to be out of here within another fifteen minutes.”

At that very moment Kennedy’s dirt-streaked face appeared above the rim of the excavation. “Here it comes!” he said, and hoisted a

burlap bag over the mounded earth.

Dutton hurried to the edge of the pit, but he moved in a quick crablike motion that permitted him to keep his eyes steadily on the boys and his gun steadily pointed at them. "It's about time," he said sharply.

Kennedy had disappeared for a moment and now he hurled a second bag over the edge. "Six more to come," he said.

Within a few minutes eight bags lined the edge of the pit. And then Kennedy, together with the two men the boys knew as Bob and Jack Dutton, climbed up to the floor of the garage. All, like Dutton himself, were covered with mud.

"All right," Dutton said sharply. "Get the stuff into the truck and don't waste any time about it. We're already a minute behind schedule. You got a gun, Kennedy?" he added.

"Sure." The man seemed surprised at the question. He pulled an automatic from a shoulder holster.

"Crawl through to the vault," Dutton ordered, "and wait there for these two to come through. I'll follow them in." He waited until Kennedy had obediently disappeared into the excavation once more, and then he turned to the boys. "O.K., you two. Into the pit. And remember I'm right behind you with this." He gestured briefly with his pistol.

Ken could sense Sandy, beside him, tensing his muscles as if he meant to put up a fight. "Come on," he said quietly. Ken had expected Dutton to leave them in the garage, but he realized that the vault would serve the man's purpose far better. And Ken believed that if they tried to thwart Dutton now, the gun in the man's hand would fire quickly, twice. Any attempt to escape at this moment would be useless.

"Hurry up," Dutton urged. "You invited yourselves to this party—now you'll just have to stay in a safe place until the rest of the guests are gone. There's plenty of air in the vault. It won't hurt you to spend the night there. In fact, you're lucky to be spending it alive, you crazy kids."

Sandy caught Ken's glance and nodded imperceptibly. He, too, realized the futility of argument.

Ken went first. He dropped down into the pit, glanced around, and saw the small round opening in one wall. He felt Sandy close behind him as he lowered himself to his knees and started to crawl through the three-foot-wide tunnel. At its far end, some thirty feet distant, Ken could see the carefully directed beam of Kennedy's flashlight, illuminating the man's narrow face and the muzzle of his automatic. Then the light flashed into the tunnel itself, blinding Ken. It remained fixed there, so that both Kennedy and Dutton could check the boys'

progress.

Steadily, on his hands and knees, Ken crept forward. It was hard going. The floor was rough, studded with sharp stones and sudden unexpected puddles of wet slime.

“Hurry up!” Dutton barked, before he was halfway through.

Ken tried to go faster. The stones cut his hands and his knees, and occasionally his head came into painful collision with a rock protruding from walls or roof.

Finally he was easing his way through the punctured wall of the bank’s concrete foundation, and edging past the broken and twisted ends of steel reinforcing rods. And then he could see clearly where an acetylene torch had cut its way through the heavy steel plate that surrounded the entire vault.

Kennedy backed away from the tunnel’s mouth and Ken crawled past him and staggered to his feet. Sandy emerged behind him. Both were caked with mud from head to foot. Ken’s left hand was bleeding freely from a nasty cut, and Sandy’s right leg showed a long angry scrape where his trousers had been ripped away. They looked at each other, and then both looked curiously around the room in which they found themselves.

The vault of the Brentwood City Bank was a shambles. In the light of several powerful electric bulbs they could see that heavy steel cabinet doors, secured by combination locks, had been blasted open. The contents of the cabinets lay strewn over the floor. Records, stock certificates, bonds-papers of all sorts scattered the small room, as if they had been tossed angrily aside by men searching for cash and interested in nothing else.

Dutton spoke to them from the mouth of the tunnel. “You’ll be found in about nineteen hours,” he said. “And until then it won’t do you any good to yell or pound on the walls. Nobody will hear you through two feet of concrete and an inch of steel. So you might as well relax and ponder on the foolishness of trying to interfere with an expert’s business.

“Go ahead, Kennedy,” he went on. “You start back and I’ll follow you.”

Kennedy ducked into the hole and disappeared. Dutton grinned at the boys in farewell. “Don’t forget to tell the police that I have a small scar above the elbow on my right arm. That might help them to find me. Get over in the far corner now, both of you.”

The boys moved to the spot he indicated.

“And stay there,” Dutton added. “I’ll be backing out, with this gun still aiming right in here. I’ve been patient with you two so far, but I wouldn’t hesitate to fire if I saw one of you stick his head down within range.”

Then, without further words, he lowered himself to his hands and knees and disappeared, feet first. The last they saw of him was his dirty hand still holding the pistol pointed back into the vault.

Ken knew Dutton had to be taken at his word. He kept Sandy beside him in the corner until several long minutes had passed. Then, cautiously, they approached the tunnel's mouth. Just as they reached it they heard Dutton's faraway voice.

"O.K.," it was saying. "Start shoveling."

They bent down and looked through the tunnel to the circle of light that marked its end in the garage pit. Almost immediately a shower of dirt curtained the opening, blurring the light. A second shower followed it immediately, and a third.

Within a few seconds they could see the circular opening beginning to close as the dirt poured into the pit. The floor level of the opening rose steadily until the circle had become a narrow slit. And finally the opening disappeared entirely, and nothing but blackness met their eyes.

Ken straightened up slowly. "Pretty smart I am," he said. "I walked us right into this."

Sandy managed a grin. "At least we've learned a lot," he said, "and it looks like we'll live to tell it."

"Oh, sure. When it's too late for the telling to do any good. By the time we're out of this vault Dutton-or whatever his name is-will probably be out of the country."

"But we'll be able to clear the Conners," Sandy pointed out stubbornly. "Did you really guess that this was what was going on in-?" He broke off abruptly. "Hey, look! They forgot something." He kicked at a pile of papers and revealed the shovel that had been almost concealed beneath them.

"A shovel!" Ken stared unbelievably for a moment and then grabbed for the handle. "Let's go!" he said. "They're probably out of the garage already. If they haven't filled in the whole pit-and I shouldn't think they'd take the time to do that-we may be out of here in an hour!"

"Sure," Sandy agreed. "We'll catch that crook yet!"

Ken was already on his knees in front of the hole. "I'll drag the shovel. Come on."

"I'll take it." Sandy bent down behind him. "Just get going and-" He broke off so suddenly that Ken twisted his head around to look up at him.

"What's the matter?" Ken demanded.

Sandy was sniffing the air, holding his head on one side and staring into space with an intent expression. "Gas," he said in a strange voice. "I smell gas."

Ken stared at him. "Gasoline?" he inquired incredulously.

"No." Sandy absently shook his head while he sniffed again.

"Cooking gas."

Ken nodded grimly. "I smell it now too."

"They must have strained a gas main when they dug the tunnel," Sandy said. "As long as the other end of the tunnel was open, the fumes probably drifted right out-and we didn't notice the smell in the garage because we had other things on our minds. But now--"

"I get it," Ken said quietly. "But now the fumes are filling up the tunnel and backing up in here."

"That's right. They're like us-they've got nowhere else to go." Once more Sandy attempted a grin but this time he couldn't quite make it.

CHAPTER XIX

UNDERGROUND

For a long moment the boys didn't meet each other's eyes. The curious dead silence of the vault was so complete that Ken thought he could hear Sandy's heartbeats as well as his own. Then the silence seemed to come alive with the dozens of questions that rocketed through his mind.

Could they stop the evil-smelling gas that seemed to ooze out of the tunnel mouth like some invisible fog? And if they couldn't stop it, how long would it be before the tunnel and the vault both were filled with the deadly fumes? Could they get out before that happened? And if not, could they survive the long hours they were doomed to be shut up in the ever-thickening atmosphere?

Ken's glance flashed hopelessly around the room. No -there was no other exit except by way of the tunnel. The vault's heavy steel doors were locked by an elaborate time mechanism that would defy anything short of nitroglycerin or acetylene torches.

In a kind of paralyzed slow motion, as if the gas had already affected him, Sandy lowered himself to his knees and sniffed along the floor at the tunnel entrance. His face had whitened.

"We're caught like rats in a trap," he muttered.

The note of panic in his voice forced Ken to clamp down on his own rising sense of terror. "Easy, Sandy," he said. "This is no time to let ourselves go. We need all the brains we've got."

"Brains!" Sandy exploded. "I'd swap all the brains both of us have for a couple of gas masks."

"We don't have any gas masks," Ken shot back, "and we do have brains. So let's use them!"

The sharpness of Ken's voice brought Sandy up abruptly. "O.K.," he said after a moment. "You're right. Let's use the brains."

"What are our possibilities?" Ken asked. "Is there any way we can stop the gas from coming in here?"

Sandy made a visible effort to concentrate on the question. "If we could block the opening to the tunnel, we might be able to keep the stuff out of the vault. But there's nothing here that could be used to make an airtight block," he added, and Ken nodded.

"Then do you suppose we could find the broken main inside the tunnel and stop the leak there?" Ken asked. But he didn't wait for Sandy to answer that question. "No, that's out," he said, shaking his head. "We don't have a flashlight. We probably couldn't even find the pipe, let alone the leak."

Sandy's foot touched the shovel that lay beside the tunnel mouth. "That's still our only chance-but it's a lot slimmer chance now than we thought it was."

Ken nodded. "You're right. That's the only way. We'll have to try to dig ourselves out-and just hope we can get through before it's too late."

He grabbed the shovel and slid it into the tunnel. Suddenly he was overcome with the need for speed-for making use of every moment at their disposal before the fumes weakened them. "Come on," he said over his shoulder.

"Wait a minute." Sandy seemed calmer, as if a full understanding of their plight had given him new strength. He walked over to one of the opened wall compartments and pulled out a section of removable steel shelving. "Maybe we can use this too-to scrape back the earth we dig out of the mouth. We'll have to move it back into the tunnel somehow. Let's go," he said, and joined Ken at the tunnel entrance.

Ken led the way inside, groping along in the darkness. He dragged the shovel behind him with his left hand-the hand he had cut on the way in, and which was now throbbing so painfully that it would have been agony to use it flat on the ground, in his hands-and-knees method of progress.

He could scarcely smell the gas any longer. He had become used to its faintly sweetish odor. But there was already a slight muzziness in his head, and occasionally he coughed, as if something were caught in his throat. One cough forced him to throw his head back and he struck it heavily on a projecting rock.

Sandy heard the dull crack and Ken's gasp. "You O.K.?" he asked.

Ken stayed still a moment, waiting for the waves of pain to diminish. "Sure," he said, and started forward again.

UNDERGROUND 189

* It seemed to him that the floor of the tunnel was far rougher than it had been on the way in, and that the puddles of slime and mud were more frequent. After he had traveled what seemed to be a long distance, he began stretching his right hand out ahead of him before he took each forward lurch on his knees, hoping to feel the fill of earth at the far end of the tunnel. But time after time he encountered only emptiness, and struggled on another foot-and another and another. Sandy's rasping breath behind him echoed against his pounding eardrums.

And then suddenly Ken's outstretched hand did come into contact with soft earth.

"We're there!" he said, and slumped against the wall for a moment's rest.

Even as he spoke he could hear the rattle of loose dirt and small

stones, slithering down into the tunnel from the loosely heaped pile at its mouth.

"Move over," Sandy said, edging up close. "Let me see what it's like."

"You won't see much," Ken muttered. He had meant it as a kind of weak joke, but Sandy paid no attention. Ken could hear Sandy thrusting his piece of shelving into the dirt, testing its depth.

"It's loose, but there's plenty of it," Sandy said grimly. "So let's get going. Give me the shovel and let me start. Here's the shelf thing-you scrape the stuff behind us as I shovel it down."

Ken didn't argue. He knew Sandy's strength was greater than his own. He could work harder and longer, and the heavy shovel would be less of a strain to his more powerful muscles.

They groped around in the thick darkness until the tools had safely changed hands. Then Sandy pressed himself against one side of the narrow tunnel, in order to have space to thrust the shovel into the earth.

"Don't put all the dirt in one pile right behind you," Sandy warned. "We don't want to be shut in on both sides."

"Right," Ken said. "I'll watch it."

The first time Sandy moved his laden shovel backward, the handle caught Ken over one eye. Sandy felt the thud.

"Sorry," he muttered. "Didn't know you were so close."

"I'll back up a little." Ken shifted on his knees, and then set to work scraping past himself the small heap of earth Sandy had dropped in front of him.

It was impossible to work quickly. The space was too small for energetic thrusts of their tools. And the heavy darkness made it necessary to do everything by touch. Sandy had to grope forward with the shovel, and move it back by guiding it along the wall. Ken had to feel for the earth Sandy had shoveled back, before he could scrape at it with the sharp-edged shelf that quickly lacerated his hands.

For what seemed hours they worked in complete silence, giving every shred of their energy to the job. Sandy paused sometimes because his body was racked by coughing spells. Ken was already coughing steadily -small hacking coughs that threatened to turn to retching gasps as the nauseous gas grew heavier and heavier in the confined space.

Finally Sandy's shovel clattered out of his hand and Ken could hear him slump against the tunnel wall. "It seems-so hopeless," he breathed. "Every time I haul out a shovelful, more dirt sinks down into that space from above."

Ken coughed. "Want me to take over?" He felt certain he couldn't hold the shovel if Sandy gave it to him, but he knew they had to keep

working-that every second was precious.

"Not yet," Sandy panted. "I'm all right."

Ken could hear him shift around to get into position again. Once more he heard the shovel scrape its way into the soft dirt, and a moment later a small heap of earth fell in front of him. Overlapping that sound was the noise of more earth sliding down into the tiny empty space Sandy had just laboriously hollowed out.

Ken scraped the earth alongside himself and then back. He used the piece of metal shelving. He used his bleeding hands. Both his knees felt as if they had been pierced by a thousand hot needles, and he knew Sandy's must feel the same.

Again they worked for what seemed hours in the hot close darkness. They didn't pause except to cough, to gasp openmouthed for a lungful of the heavy gas-laden air.

Each shovelful of shifted earth diminished their working space and their air supply. Every breath that tore through their throats sounded like a sob. Through the numbness that was settling over him Ken knew that their movements were becoming slower-that they were working in a kind of nightmare where every gesture was a long, agonized effort.

Ken's stomach turned sickeningly, in protest at the reeking atmosphere. He slumped back on his heels. The metal shelf slipped from his fingers. And then he heard Sandy's shovel thrust once more into the earth, and he forced himself up to his knees, his hands groping for the tool he had dropped.

Just as he found it, the shovel struck against his hand, bearing heavily downward. Ken could feel the skin being scraped from his knuckles as shavings roll from soft pine under the blade of a plane. He couldn't control the gasp of pain. But it was faint-like the whimper of a small animal.

And suddenly Ken knew he couldn't take any more. In his mind he could see the bank vault-smooth-floored, brightly lit. It seemed a haven. If they could only get back there! Soon the gas fumes would overcome them and they would drift quietly to sleep.

"But not here!" Ken gasped aloud. "Not here. Let's go back!"

"Hold on!" Sandy's voice came to him as a barely audible whisper, but there was strength in it. And he didn't stop working as he spoke. "Keep moving!" he urged. "Ken-keep moving! Can you hear me?"

"I hear you." Ken couldn't tell if he had spoken the words aloud or not. Dimly he was aware of small shovel loads of earth thudding to the floor in front of him.

"Ken!" Sandy said. "Move it back! There's another load-move it back!"

Almost without willing it, Ken's hands began to perform the task

Sandy had set him. With fingers that were numb to the feel of the earth, Ken clawed feebly at the pile of dirt before him, shoved it around past his own body and on back as far as his arms could reach. Then, automatically, he swung around once more and again sank his fingers in the soft moist dirt.

“Good!” Sandy gasped faintly. “Keep moving!”

Fingers into the dirt, pull back, shove, and thrust rearward-over and over and over again Ken went through the motions. But he couldn’t keep up with the pile of dirt that Sandy kept depositing before him. It rose slowly but steadily.

Sandy’s shovel came against it finally and he lost his balance. The shovel fell.

Sandy let it go. Almost as if he didn’t know what had happened, he kept on digging-with his hands now.

And suddenly, through the thunderous pounding in his own ears, through the numbness that had settled over his brain, Ken became aware that Sandy was no longer moving. He froze perfectly still, waiting to hear some reassuring noise from the darkness in front of him. But there was nothing but silence.

“Sandy!” Ken hurled himself forward, touched Sandy’s feet, his legs, his limp body. His hands felt their way upward, along the slope of Sandy’s back, to his shoulders, his neck. And there they encountered earth.

For a blinding flash Ken’s brain cleared and he realized what must have happened. Sandy had slumped forward into the soft earth and more had drifted down onto his head. He was being smothered!

Wildly, with a burst of strength born of sheer terror, Ken clawed at the dirt, trying to free Sandy’s head.

And suddenly his fingers were clawing at nothingness.

In that same instant Ken sucked into his mouth a strange, sharp something very different from the heavy sweet atmosphere he had been breathing.

With some last remnant of intelligence Ken turned Sandy’s head so that it lay sideways on the earth. And then Ken too slumped forward, falling half beside Sandy, half on top of him.

“Air,” he was whispering inaudibly. “Air. You made it. We’re through.”

Ken never knew how long they lay there. He drifted into unconsciousness and then was pulled sharply back to his senses by a retching nausea. He heaved himself into a sitting position. Sandy stirred.

“Sandy?” Ken gasped. “You all right? Breathe-breathe deep. We’re through!”

At first, through the waves of sickness that were sweeping over

him, Ken thought the voice he heard was Sandy's. He wondered why it sounded so far away-why the words were indistinguishable.

With some vague idea of being able to hear him better, Ken clawed at the earth again, enlarging the small hole that opened into the dimness of the pit.

And then suddenly Ken's senses flashed to alertness. He grasped Sandy's shoulder and shook it. "Listen!" he whispered.

"What is it?" Sandy's answering whisper was faint, but it told Ken he was conscious.

"Listen!" Ken commanded again, his mouth against Sandy's ear.

The voice was Dutton's. He spoke quietly, but hate and rage seemed to fill the whole vast cavern of the garage with every word he uttered.

"I should have known better than to trust you, Tolliver," he was saying. "Everybody warned me you were a no-good double-crossing rat!"

CHAPTER XX

CAUTION! FIREWORKS!

So Tolliver had been in on the deal all along, Ken thought, almost absently. He wasn't surprised. The one realization that occupied his whole mind now was that Tolliver and Dutton were both up there in the garage, blocking the escape which Ken and Sandy had exhausted themselves to achieve.

And then Sandy moved slightly away from him, and in the dusky half-light Ken could see his big dirt-caked hands shoving at the soft earth. The small hole which they had broken through into the pit began to widen. Sandy's chin jerked upward in a gesture which said unmistakably, "Let's get up out of here quick-before they find us!"

Ken couldn't share Sandy's optimism. He didn't see how they could possibly get past Dutton and Tolliver both. But almost instinctively his hands too began carefully pushing aside the earth.

Tolliver's voice drifted down to them. "You should have listened to your friends," he was saying calmly. "Then you wouldn't be in this spot. But you were afraid to tackle the job without somebody like me to depend on-somebody who could assure you a safe getaway plane to Mexico."

Sandy began to edge forward, his broad shoulders just fitting between the walls of loosely piled soil. An instant later he was crouching in the bottom of the pit, waiting for Ken to join him.

"Look, Tolliver!" The sullen voice of the man they knew as Bob Dutton joined the conversation above. "We stuck to our bargain. We engineered the accidents, including that mirror trick with the car lights, which *you'd* never have been smart enough to think of. We dug the tunnel. We blasted through the wall and cut the steel plate. We fixed the alarm so it wouldn't go off. We even went through that phony act in your cabin the other night, for the benefit of those eavesdropping kids-just to make sure nobody would tie you up with this job. And now that we've got the dough you're welshing. Why? Isn't your share big enough?"

"Big enough?" Tolliver laughed. "Only a sucker is satisfied with half of any take when he can get it all. And I can."

"What's the point of talking to them, boss?" a strange voice put in. "Why not just get it over?"

"I'm running things, Jackson," Tolliver said sharply.

Ken, pulling himself out beside Sandy, automatically registered the name Tolliver had just spoken. Jackson, he remembered, was the man who had rented Cabin Fifteen at the Lakeside Tourist Court.

Dutton's voice broke a brief silence. "You may think you're being smart, Tolliver. But I say you're a fool. Sure -you can get away with all the loot in the truck, because you've got your two hoodlums holding guns on us."

As Dutton spoke, Ken saw Sandy rise slowly in the pit until he stood erect. His head was still below the heaped-up dirt rimming the long rectangular excavation. Sandy looked quickly around, spied a ladder in a corner, and shifted it silently to the wall of the pit opposite the office. He motioned to Ken to mount.

Ken hesitated only a moment. There seemed nothing else to do. If any of the men emerged from the office, the boys were certain to be seen where they were-and they couldn't go back into the gas-filled tunnel. Ken crossed to the ladder and started quietly up.

Dutton was still talking. "But then what will happen?" he asked. "Do you think we'd keep our mouths shut? The police will know about you before you get to the airfield. You'll never get to spend a penny of this stuff."

Tolliver laughed. "Don't you worry about me. I've got an alibi that would stand up in any court in the country. And just to show you that I'm not afraid of what you can tell the cops-I'm going to arrange for them to find you here."

There was a momentary silence and then a sudden scuffle. Ken stood rigid, halfway up the ladder.

"Back!" Jackson's voice rang out. "Back! Or I'll-I"

"Get him!" Tolliver snapped.

There was the sound of a body thudding to the floor, followed by another brief silence.

Dutton broke it, speaking in a voice choked with fury. "You'll pay for this, Tolliver. Nobody hits me without paying for it."

"Sure-sure. I'll pay for it in my own way." There was a note of cruel laughter in Tolliver's tone. "Jackson, get moving. Take them down into the tunnel."

"Tunnel?" Dutton's henchman, Kennedy, spoke for the first time. "What's the idea? What are you-?"

Ken wasted no further time. He climbed swiftly up the rest of the ladder, sent one glance over the piled earth on the other side of the pit to assure himself that the men were, as he had guessed, all inside the small garage office. He could see them clearly through its wide open door. Then Ken rolled over the mound of earth at the top of the ladder to land on the cement floor of the garage between the pit itself and the wall opposite the office.

"Never mind the questions," Jackson was saying. "You heard the boss. Get moving."

"No!" Bob Dutton almost shouted the word.

Sandy landed beside Ken. Ten feet away, in the direction of the distant front doors, stood the big Diesel tractor. Sandy gestured toward it and Ken nodded. It would offer them some protection. And if the men started toward them, they could circle around the vehicle.

There were sounds of another scuffle coming from the office as they hurried toward the tractor on all fours, unmindful now of their bruised and bleeding hands and knees. They stood erect only when they were between the tractor's high radiator and the wall of the garage. Ken looked longingly toward the front doors. They appeared to be a mile away, though he knew they couldn't be more than a hundred and twenty feet from where he and Sandy stood.

Cautiously Ken peered around one of the tractor headlights. Tolliver, a gun in his hand, was just backing out of the office doorway. After him, facing forward, were the thin-faced man named Kennedy, the two men who had posed as Dutton's sons, and Dutton himself. All three Duttons had their hands clasped above their heads. One side of Dutton's face was swollen and discolored. Tolliver's two henchmen brought up the rear of the silent procession, prodding their captives forward with ugly snub-nosed automatics.

When all stood in the clear space between the office and the pit, Tolliver ordered, "Jackson, get one of the bags out of the truck."

"You're sure, boss, that we have to waste one on-?"

"I said to get it," Tolliver interrupted.

Jackson obeyed, walking quickly to the light delivery truck a few feet away, opening its back doors, and returning to Tolliver with one of the heavy sacks the boys had watched Kennedy hoist up out of the pit.

How long ago had that been? Ken wondered, and stole a quick look at his wrist watch. What he saw amazed him. It was only twelve thirty-and he and Sandy had already been out of the tunnel some minutes. Had their seemingly endless ordeal there only lasted a little more than half an hour? It seemed impossible... .

Ken's thoughts broke off as he saw Tolliver, having opened the sack, reach in and bring out several neatly wrapped packages of bills. He looked at them quickly, as if to satisfy himself as to the contents of the sack, and then dropped them back in again.

"All right," he said to Jackson. "Take it back to the vault."

Jackson picked up the bag and walked toward the pit.

"Hey!" Kennedy turned an agonized face toward Dutton. "Don't let him go down there! He'll find the—"

"Shut up!" Dutton ordered.

But at the edge of the pit Jackson stopped of his own accord. "The tunnel opening is half filled with dirt," he said.

"So what?" Tolliver said impatiently. "Dig it out."

Ken and Sandy exchanged a glance that was full of sudden understanding. They had both realized, simultaneously, that Tolliver didn't know Dutton had imprisoned them in there. Ken glanced at Dutton. The man's face wore the faint trace of a smile. Apparently he believed the boys were still in the tunnel. Perhaps, Ken thought, Dutton even hoped the boys would surprise Jackson as he emerged with his burden into the vault, overpower him and take his gun-and then come back through the tunnel to the garage. Probably Dutton even believed he could win their allegiance against Tolliver, in that case. What would Dutton's reaction be when he learned the truth? Ken wondered, and realized suddenly that he and Sandy would be in worse trouble than ever when that happened, if they were still in the garage.

"This place stinks of gas." Jackson's voice floated up out of the pit. "They must have busted a pipe."

"Gas?" Tolliver sounded pleased. "Fine."

Ken looked around swiftly and saw that Sandy was doing the same. Twenty feet away-twenty feet nearer the door-stood the platform truck. Ken glanced once more at the group of men. Tolliver had herded them forward, so that Dutton and his followers now stood along the edge of the pit, facing it and with their backs to the front door. Tolliver and his henchmen were just behind them, with their backs also toward the door.

Ken nudged Sandy, gestured toward the platform truck and waited for Sandy's nod. They could risk getting that far, if they moved silently so as not to attract attention.

Ken waited until he heard Jackson muttering something about being able to get through now. Then, under the covering sound of Tolliver's answer, he started across the open space. He knew Sandy would waste no time in following.

They made it. Huddled on the ground, almost under the chassis of the truck, they sat still, scarcely daring to breathe.

The truck was facing the front of the garage, its radiator pointing toward the big doors and almost in line with them. When Ken noticed that there was a large carton standing on the truck's otherwise empty platform, he risked standing up in order to be in a position from which he could watch the men's movements.

Suddenly Sandy, who had risen beside him, touched Ken's arm and then pointed to the lettering on the carton. CAUTION! FIREWORKS it read. There was a wild gleam of hope in Sandy's eye as he went through a pantomime of lighting a firecracker and hurling it across the garage.

Ken could feel his mud-caked face crack and realized that he must be grinning. Sandy was right! They might somehow use exploding

firecrackers to create a diversion-and escape from the garage before the men realized what was happening.

Ken nodded. His eyes signaled, "Let's try it!" Sandy reached a long arm up and into the carton. When he withdrew his hand he was grasping half a dozen two-inch salutes. He deposited them carefully on the floor and reached back into the carton again.

When the boys finally lowered themselves noiselessly to the floor there were some two dozen firecrackers lying beside them. Sandy also held the piece of string that had once tied the carton shut. Swiftly, with his knife, he cut it into lengths and began tying up bundles of firecrackers, five or six to a bundle.

While he worked, Ken slowly and carefully pulled the fuses from several of the salutes. He took the first bundle Sandy completed, bent all six fuses so that they touched each other, and tied them together with one of his fuses. He inspected the finished product proudly. It ought to make enough noise to—

Tolliver's voice broke into his thoughts. "When Jackson returns, I'll expect all four of you to get down into that tunnel without any fuss," he was saying.

"And suppose we don't want to go?" Dutton's voice was taunting.

"A bullet or two might convince you," Tolliver said.

Dutton laughed. "You won't shoot us, Tolliver. It wouldn't suit your purpose at all to have us found with bullet holes in us. That wouldn't look a bit accidental."

"Why should I care how it looks?" Tolliver demanded.

"Give me credit for a certain amount of intelligence, Tolliver," Dutton said. "You're planning to get us all down in that vault and then blow it up with us in there."

Then-you hope-the police will think we had an accident while we were blasting through the wall, and that somehow most of the money got burned up in the process. You're even leaving that one sack of bills down there to clinch your story."

"Make up fairy tales if you feel like it," Tolliver said evenly, "but you'll get down there in that vault when I tell you to."

"Why don't you just shoot us now?" Dutton asked. "It would save time. And it'll certainly give the cops something to think about, won't it?"

"I'll give you—" Tolliver began. But Jackson's voice, as he emerged again into the pit, interrupted him.

"All right, boss," he called. "All set."

Ken wished he could see Dutton's face. Jackson had returned from the vault-and without having seen any sign of what Dutton had expected him to find there.

Suddenly Dutton began to laugh. "I should have known," he said,

“when he told you the tunnel entrance was only half-covered over. They’ve escaped! Now you’re cooked, Tolliver!” His voice spluttered away into a crazy high cackle of mirth.

“What are you talking about?” Tolliver snapped. “Who’s escaped? Stop laughing! Answer me!”

Dutton gasped, half choking, “Those two snoopy kids. They busted in here just before we hauled the sacks out, and I put them in the vault for safekeeping. But they’re not there now, are they, Jackson? And you know what that means? They’re out some place getting the cops! Go ahead, Tolliver. Now’s the time to shoot us, you two-faced-!”

“Jackson!” Tolliver’s bellow of rage drowned out the rest of Dutton’s words. “Are those kids down there?”

“Nobody’s down there, boss.” Jackson’s voice was thin and frightened. “Maybe we’d better get out of here fast.”

“Bon’t be a fool! That laughing hyena is lying. He’s-“

“Oh, I’m lying, am I?” Dutton’s laughter had died to a series of small breathless chortles. “Then let’s just wait here a few minutes until the cops come, and we’ll see.”

“Jackson, Wilks,” Tolliver’s rage had frozen into a deadly calm. “Search the whole garage-every foot of it. Those kids may have been in that vault, but they certainly never got out of this garage. We’d have heard them if they opened either of the two doors. So if they’re here we’ll find them-and right now. Get to it.”

CHAPTER XXI

FINAL EXPLOSION

Sandy didn't pause in his task of tying the second bundle. But his fingers trembled as he bunched the six fuses together. And Ken's hand was shaking as he took the bundle and tied another loose fuse around the half-dozen ends.

Shuffling footsteps began to move over the garage floor.

Ken groped in his pocket and found a package of matches. He gestured to indicate to Sandy that he would throw one bundle of firecrackers into the left-rear corner of the garage, and that Sandy should throw the other into the right-rear corner.

Sandy shook his head. "Not good enough," he breathed against Ken's ear. "We need--"

The door of the tractor creaked open and slammed shut. "Not in here," Wilks reported.

"Don't move!" Tolliver barked. And for an instant the boys froze, certain they had been spotted. "I'm watching you," Tolliver warned.

"Keep watching," Dutton said. "Try and watch all four of us at once."

Ken swallowed with a dry throat. Tolliver hadn't been talking to them after all. But any moment now--

"Jackson, look under the delivery truck," Tolliver ordered. "Wilks, you'd better cover the front doors in case they try to make a break. I can watch the rear door from here."

"And us too, don't forget," Dutton taunted.

Just then there was a thud and a grunt. One of Tolliver's men pounded back across the cement floor toward his boss. "Back up!" he was shouting. "Drop it-drop it!"

Swiftly the boys raised themselves to peer over the platform. Tolliver lay on the ground, blood oozing from a cut on his temple. The man they knew as Jack Dutton crouched over him, a rock in his hand.

"Drop it!" Wilks repeated, leveling his gun.

"Good shot," Randolph Dutton approved, beaming at the stone thrower.

Tolliver groaned and raised himself to a sitting position. He leaned over and picked up his gun. "You'll be sorry for that," he promised, struggling to his feet.

For a moment there was a confused murmur of talk from the group of men around the pit. Wilks was brushing eagerly at Tolliver's coat and Tolliver was shoving him angrily away.

Under cover of the sound Ken pulled Sandy close and whispered,

“Can you drive this?” He touched the truck behind which they were hidden. “It’s our only chance.” He had realized that Sandy was right when he said the firecrackers alone would not give them time to dash across the long open floor of the garage. “Start it in gear -head for the door-go right through,” he added.

Sandy nodded. “If she starts,” he breathed.

Ken indicated the firecrackers. The noise of their explosion would cover the starting of the engine. Sandy nodded again. Then, with infinite care, he began to ease the door of the truck’s cab open.

“Let me alone,” Tolliver snapped. “I’m all right. Get after those kids.”

Again the shuffling footsteps moved over the floor.

Sandy slid around the half-open door, edged himself up onto the driver’s seat and inched along it to the wheel, his head bent forward almost to his knees to keep himself below the cab’s rear window.

Ken watched him, his heart thudding heavily.

Sandy’s fingers turned the key in the ignition switch. He shifted the gear-shift lever into low speed. His right foot reached for the starter Dutton and his left pressed the accelerator to the floor.

Ken had already pulled a match from its folder and was holding it poised over the striking surface. Sandy nodded to him. He was ready to go as soon as Ken signaled by throwing the firecrackers. Ken waited for some slight noise that would cover the scrape of the match.

It came. “Nobody under the delivery truck, boss-or inside it either,” Jackson called out. The delivery truck door slammed shut.

Ken had lit the match while the man’s first words were being spoken. By the time the truck door slammed the flame was licking at the fuses. Tiny sparks flew. There was an almost noiseless sizzle. Ken waited for one last moment, to be certain several of the fuses were safely caught. Then his arm went back and flashed forward. The bundle of firecrackers arched high and sailed toward the rear of the garage. Even before it landed in the doorway of the office, Ken was igniting the second bundle.

The roar of the first explosion was deafening. In that walled space the noise bounced from one side of the room to the other and then back again. The second explosion split the air a few seconds later, while the first was still violently resounding.

Ken took a precious second to light two more single salutes, throwing them haphazardly toward the pit just as he dove inside the cab and slammed the door.

The truck’s engine was coughing-starting and stalling and starting again. Sandy’s right foot kept the starter Dutton jammed down. His left pumped the accelerator pedal desperately.

They heard a yell-a shout that was cut off short by the explosion of

the last salutes.

Then another concussion rocked the garage-this time a flat cracking sound.

Glass showered over Ken's and Sandy's shoulders as a bullet tore through the rear window and went out through the windshield.

Ken ducked his head low, jerking Sandy's arm to pull him down too.

The engine caught with a roar. The truck lurched forward.

Almost as soon as the wheels began to turn, a savage cry sounded in Ken's ear, and Jackson leaped on the running board beside him. Jackson's left hand clutched for a hold on the door while his right thrust a gun through the open window.

Ken had no time and no room in which to draw back his arm for a punch. He drove his elbow directly at Jackson's face. It connected with a bone-jarring thud. Jackson's head rocked back. His fingers slipped from the door. He plummeted backward off the running board to land heavily on the concrete.

The wheels were really rolling now, but slowly. Ken turned toward Sandy and saw Wilks on the left running board, reaching through the window toward the wheel. Ken half rose out of his seat, but Sandy forestalled him. Hanging on to the wheel with his right hand, he thrust the door latch open with his left and then threw his shoulder against the door. It swung out under his weight, carrying Wilks with it.

Another shot rang out. More glass showered down on them.

Only twenty feet ahead of them now stood the heavy wooden doors. The truck's engine was roaring and its speedometer needle had edged up to fifteen miles an hour. And yet Ken felt that they would never make that last twenty feet. He leaned forward, willing the truck to move faster.

"Here goes!" Sandy yelled.

A bullet cracking against metal almost drowned out his words.

And suddenly the doors seemed to be on top of them, standing as solidly as a pair of stone mountains in their way.

Sandy ducked his face behind the shield of his right shoulder and Ken flung an arm over his eyes.

The truck's bumper struck. Wood shattered, hinges and locks snapped, glass from the doors rained down in a shower. The shatterproof windshield of the truck frosted over with a thousand cracks.

Then, for an instant, the vehicle seemed to hesitate. The sagging doors still stood between it and safety.

They flew outward suddenly. And the truck roared into the open.

"Look out!" Ken's agonized shout brought Sandy's head up.

He wrenched the wheel hard to the left and jammed on the brakes. The truck swung in a screeching arc and stopped with a heavy jolt. Its front wheels were a scant two inches from the hood of a Brentwood police squad car. Andy Kane and two of his men were already tumbling out of it.

Kane's headlong rush toward the garage stopped midway. He had seen the boys, slumped weakly against the back of the cab's seat.

"What are you-?" he began. "Take care of those two!" he ordered one of his men. And then, waving the other to follow him, he dashed toward the shattered doors.

"Drop those guns!" the boys heard him yell. At the unmistakable sound of weapons clattering to the floor, they grinned faintly at each other and began to climb down out of the cab.

As their unsteady feet touched the pavement, Pop's sedan rocketed around the corner and an instant later Pop and Bert were half hugging, half shaking them, both talking at once.

Pop's voice was loudest. "How'd you get here?" he demanded. "Do you know you might have been killed? Dutton's a dangerous character-wanted in six places for bank robbery. We were with Kane when he got the news from Wide Vista."

Sandy grinned. "Wanted in seven places," he corrected. "Get your facts straight, Pop."

"What?" Pop shouted. "What are you talking about?"

"Go inside and look for yourself." Ken nodded back toward the garage. "The Brentwood Bank has just been robbed." And then he added with a grin, "Unsuccessfully."

An hour later the *Advance* office was nearer a state of complete chaos than it had ever been before. Pop was getting out an extra on the dramatic capture of Tom Crockett, alias Randolph Dutton, and of the other five men who had been caught by Kane and his men in the Conner garage. The Fourth-of-July parade, picnic, and float-judging contest had been almost forgotten in the excitement. Only five minutes before had Pop remembered to call in the high school newspaper editor to help out by preparing a report on what would normally have been one of the biggest stories of the summer-a story that Pop now couldn't spare any of his own staff to handle.

Pop and Bert were both pounding their typewriters furiously, and their words were being set in type almost as fast as they were written. Sandy was downstairs in his darkroom. Ken had just returned from the police station. Both of them wore several hastily applied bandages, but neither had time to remember the cuts and lacerations they covered.

"It's pretty much as we doped it out," Ken reported, raising his voice over the clatter of the typewriters that didn't pause as Pop and

Bert lifted their heads to listen. "Tolliver planned the job six months ago and made a deal with Crockett to blow the vault. When they couldn't buy the Conners out, Crockett figured out the series of accidents. Tolliver put up the money-and he was also arranging the getaway."

"Was that scene at Cabin Fifteen the other night really staged just to throw us-you, I mean," Bert corrected himself with a grin, "off the track?"

Ken nodded. "When we didn't stop poking around after that cotter-pin trick, they were afraid we'd tie Crockett and Tolliver together and figure things out. So they kept an eye on us, and then staged the cabin scene. I guess we should have known there was something wrong. They made it too easy to follow them that night."

He started for his own typewriter. "They're a smart crowd, all right. I guess they'd have gotten away with the whole thing if Tolliver hadn't gotten so greedy at the end and tried a double cross." He slipped paper into his machine and started to type with his four unbandaged fingers.

The phone rang and Pop grabbed it up. "Yes-so soon? Great!" He dropped the instrument. "Bert, you're covering the Conner angle, aren't you?"

Bert nodded. "What's new?" His flying fingers paused.

"That was Mort, to say that the insurance agent practically promised to reinstate their insurance immediately. And customers are already calling Mort up to tell him how glad they are he's back in business."

Bert smiled widely and began to bang again. "As soon as I finish this paragraph, I'll let Mom know."

The phone rang again and Pop grabbed it. A moment later he, too, was grinning. "And you think this is news to us? Don't you know we run a newspaper? Expect us when you see us," he added, and hung up. "Mom," he explained to the others. "Telling us about Mort's good news."

Sandy limped up the cellar stairs, dropped the first set of prints on Pop's desk, and limped out again.

The phone rang. "You get it this time, Bert," Pop ordered.

Bert picked it up. "Brentwood *Advance*... What's that, ma'am?" He listened a moment longer and then nodded toward Pop. "You'd better handle this. Lady wants to tell the society editor about a party she's having tonight."

"A party! Give me that phone!" Pop snatched it out of Bert's hand. "Ma'am," he bellowed, "there's just been a bank robbery in-" He broke off abruptly and began to glare over the instrument at Bert. Then he smiled. "Sure-we'll make it," he said into the phone, and hung up.

"You and your tricks," he muttered. "That was Mom," he told Ken. "She's having a party tonight."

"Good!" Sandy spoke from the doorway. "It's about time somebody in this madhouse gave a thought to food."

"Food! You can talk about food at a time like this?" Hank, the compositor, shouldered Sandy aside as he dashed through from the back room. "Do I get some copy or do I make up my own stories on the linotype machine?" He took the pictures out of Sandy's hand. "And how am I going to get these ready if you stand here gabbing all day?" A second later he was gone again, having snatched half-filled pages from Ken's and Pop's and Bert's machines on his way.

Once more the phone rang. Pop picked it up and almost immediately thrust it away from him at arm's length. Ken and Sandy both recognized the anguished cries of Granger issuing from the instrument.

Ken grinned and lifted the extension on his own desk. "I'll take him," he told Pop. "Granger? ... Sure-I'm ready right now. I can give it to you immediately if you want to put a rewrite man on the phone... . Yes, the pictures are coming up now. Sandy'll put them on the 4:10 train."

Ken looked up at Sandy while he waited for the rewrite man to get on the wire.

"Be sure to tell him," Sandy said, "that had it not been for your magnificent logic, your farseeing vision and--"

Ken raised his voice to drown out Sandy's words. "Sometimes," he said, "I think we should have stayed down in that tunnel. Except for the slight irritation of leaking gas, it was mighty quiet and peaceful down there."

Sandy grinned. "Oh, well," he said, "we don't have a bank robbery every Fourth of July. It'll probably seem so quiet and peaceful around here for the rest of the summer that we'll wish we'd saved some of those firecrackers."

But they were to learn all too soon that they didn't need firecrackers for excitement. They found plenty of that when they started out on the adventure that came to be known as *The Mystery of the Galloping Horse*.

THE END

THE CLUE OF THE PHANTOM CAR

A KEN HOLT Mystery, no. 8

By Bruce Campbell